

The Density of Fog

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Relationships:

Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Midoriya Izuku, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Shinsou Hitoshi, Midoriya Izuku/Shinsou Hitoshi, Midoriya Izuku & Shirakumo Oboro, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Shirakumo Oboro

Characters:

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Additional Tags:

Mentioned Shirakumo Oboro, like a lot lol, Izuku is Oboro's brother, Midoriya Izuku Has a Quirk, Parental Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead Adopts Shinsou Hitoshi, Bakugou Katsuki Swears A Lot, Mineta Minoru is Expelled from U.A. High School, Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia Manga Spoilers, Shinsou Hitoshi is Bad at Feelings, Deaf Bakugou Katsuki, Midoriya Inko's Bad Parenting, Kurogiri is Shirakumo Oboro, Minor Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead/Shirakumo Oboro, Past Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead/Shirakumo Oboro, Midoriya Izuku Does Not Have One for All Quirk, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead is Bad at Feelings

Language:

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Series:

Part 1 of [Shirakumo Izuku](#)

Collections:

Read it and weep, Bnha Bookclub Discord Recs, Cheshure's Fav Re-Reads, Bnha titles that were definitely worth my sleepless nights, A Picky Reader's Top Picks, DerangedDeceiver's Favorite Fics, Top 10%, ☆ Little Red's BNHA Library ☆, Storycatchers' pile of heroic hero stuff, I suffer from this condition called having good taste, Deku Has A Brain, BNHA Canon Rewrites/Rehashes- with a twist!, DRAW THE CHARACTERS!!!!, Lady's collection of PERFECT fics., 📖 Fanfic Forum Discord Recs, Honestly every fanfic of Izuku I have ever read., Surprise! It's Trauma!, passes MY vibe check!, isabella9792_readinglist, Angry Bnha, Some good bnha, great reads, Bug's Fav MHA Fics, Izuku's Dads, Best of ShinDeku, Izuku Angst (aka Give Izuku a Hug Challenge), soul healing comes from fanfiction, God Tier BNHA, BNHA Treasure Box, Shindeku Treasure Box, Finished Favs, My hero academia, Favs mesmo, my hero academia: a medley, Long_fics, BaNHAMmer, Favorite BNHA Fics ❤️👉, Flashfreeze Recs, Leannic Recs, 🤝👉 good shit, Bnha fics that give me a reason to live™ < 3, 💎Chris's Best Izuku Fics💎, Myra_Approved_Version_of_Midoriya_Izuku, STO My Hero Academia - completed works, The_best_fics:_D, Creative Chaos Discord Recs, hixpatch's all time favorites, BNHA Library, my heart is here, Emiko has read this👉👉, Quality Fics, Todo lo que puedo llegar a OLVIDAR, Don't forget, Rosemagic's Library, DadZawa Protecc fics, RereadingForTheSoul, Sad fic or not (often they are), Best of MHA, Ashes' Library, Polished Gems, Nicee, Dkn, Bnha (rheos), Finished Fics (bnha), jrmuffin's favorites, 💎Favoritos💎, koala's recs, ☁️👉 precious cloudboy, I'm in love with these fics, These fics made me scream, good soup -i mean books, bnha, AnoditeOmniaAbuzz, BNHA Fics that cured my cancer, bnha fics, ShinDeku_CatAndRabbit

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by [ive_been_losing_sleep](#)

Summary

Aizawa Shouta hasn't seen or heard anything of Shirakumo Oboro in over a decade, mostly by design, but he's thought of him every day since his death.

And then he watches Shirakumo Izuku, younger brother of Shirakumo Oboro, take down the zero-pointer, and he knows he's already identified one problem child of the year.

Notes

very excited about this one, my friends. first chapter is a little short, but i'm hoping the others will be longer. please enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Aizawa Shouta hasn't seen or heard anything of Shirakumo Oboro in over a decade, mostly by design, but he's thought of him every day since his death. Which is why, when he sees the boy with wispy mist floating from the strands of his hair, his mind immediately goes to his lost friend.

And then he watches Shirakumo Izuku, younger brother of Shirakumo Oboro, take down the zero-pointer, and he knows he's already identified one problem child of the year. It would be just Shouta's luck that he's related to his greatest regret, though.

The day had started so well, too. He had sent Hitoshi off to his own exams knowing that even if his son starts at UA in gen-ed he would make it into the hero course eventually, just like Shouta had. The coffee maker in the teacher's lounge had brewed an acceptable cup of coffee, which it was always hit or miss on. The students he proctored during the written exams were quiet and subdued, so no issues there.

Then Hizashi, who *should* have been explaining the hero course exam to a room of middle schoolers at the time, had sent him a very incoherent text message that could only have meant trouble.

Scanning the heads of hero-hopefuls waiting at the starting gates, it didn't take long to realize what that trouble was.

Shirakumo Izuku

Quirk: Fog; Can control the humidity of the nearby area, creating a fog that typically becomes denser as its size grows smaller, making it capable of holding considerable weight.

The picture on his file is a near match to Shouta's memory of Oboro but overlaid with a soft green instead of that bright blue. Same facial features, the same *smile*. The ends of Izuku's curly hair trail into green tendrils of fog, and even in the photo, his eyes seem to glow bright green.

Shouta's attention doesn't stray from Shirakumo throughout the entire exam. He displays an impressive amount of control of his Quirk, even if Shouta's critical eye can see room for improvement. His clouds aren't quite like Oboro's—who made large, fluffy monstrosities and used them as his personal purse and carriage—but Izuku uses this to

his advantage, weaving the fog together to create tiny, solid platforms, hoisting himself into the air and kicking down hard on the robots from above. A solid strategy considering his control of humidity isn't as naturally destructive as the Quirks of most other contenders in the exams.

He uses them defensively, too, creating dense shields from thin air to block hits aiming for himself and, when possible, other examinees. If his villain points were lacking, which they might be solely due to the unfortunate Quirk matchup, he is surely at least gaining rescue points. Those are what Shouta really cares about, anyway. A hero should always prioritize saving lives over destruction.

Then the zero-pointer appears, and Shouta knows what will happen the second before it does. Oboro had always been reckless, had never once considered abandoning someone in need, and of course that trait would happen to be genetic. Izuku charges forward, crouching in front of the girl trapped beneath the rubble, unafraid of the robot stomping towards them. Then, he whirls to face the zero-pointer, eyes flaring with mist as if a fog machine was lodged in his skull. Shouta wonders what he's trying to accomplish, since he sees nothing until the zero-pointer shudders, sparking as it collapses to the ground in a heap. Heavy fog leaks from its vents like sludge.

Beside him, Nezu cackles gleefully. Not good. "How *fascinating*."

"Care to explain what just happened?" Shouta is glad Nemuri has the balls to ask, because he's curious but doesn't have the energy to deal with that look on Nezu's face.

"Isn't it obvious?" the rat asks as he takes a sip of his tea, even though it *clearly* isn't obvious. "Shirakumo increased the humidity within the robot, short-circuiting its wiring by causing water damage. Incredible."

"If he could do that why wasn't he doing it before?" Shouta mutters. If the kid was wasting his potential...

Then, on screen, Izuku wobbles and clutches his forehead as he attempts to steady himself.

"It must require a lot of his energy to have created so much fog that it managed to damage the zero pointer," Nezu explains just as Izuku's knees buckle and he falls to the ground. "Not to worry. Shuzenji is aware of the situation and has it handled."

“Room for improvement then,” Shouta offers. “He’s still conscious at least, so he knows his limits.”

“Quite right! And I’m sure you’ll have a wonderful time honing his skills as his teacher next year!”

“You’ve decided he’ll be my problem so quickly? Give him to Vlad. I want nothing to do with Shirakumo, although I’m sure you already know that.”

“Oh, I’ve had the classes organized since the exam ended! Shirakumo will surely excel under your tutelage, Aizawa, and I know you well enough to expect that you not allow personal connections affect your treatment of the students. Am I incorrect in that assumption?”

Gritting his teeth, Shouta groaned, “It has nothing to do with ‘personal connections.’ I’d simply prefer to not deal with another problem child this year.”

Nemuri laughed under her breath. “All your students are ‘problem children,’ Shouta.”

“Yes, but *this one* will be a Problem Child with *emphasis*.”

Unfortunately, the time before school starts goes exactly as Shouta expects it to. Hitoshi is placed in gen-ed, which he is understandably disappointed about, but at least he’s determined to prove his worth in the sports festival. Shouta’s class list is full of problem children, as it is every year, including a boy that placed second in the entrance exam with only villain points who will undoubtedly be an issue in class.

And, of course, Shirakumo Izuku is in 1-A as well, just as Nezu promised. He had managed to earn 23 villain points—impressive with a Quirk lacking offense—and an additional 60 rescue points, ranking him first.

On the first day, Shouta sneaks into the room when no one’s paying attention like he always does, and he observes. Naturally, the seating chart placed Izuku right behind the villain-points boy, Bakugou Katsuki, conveniently putting the most problematic of the Problem Children in one place. From his position unnoticed on the floor,

Shouta watches the two interact.

(His smile is just like Oboro's. It hurts to see.)

Bakugou is busy sneering about something, while Izuku seemingly attempts to placate him with only moderate success. Every small explosion fired from the blonde's palms are easily, almost instinctively, blocked from spreading outward by thick fog, but Bakugou continues his tirade without pause, gesturing to the classroom at large and complaining about the presence of 'damn extras' ruining his reputation by association and glaring particularly viciously at Iida Tenya. With a weary look, Izuku just pushes Bakugou back into his seat, pointing to the clock as the class bell rings, and he finally quiets—even if he does growl something under his breath, which Izuku sighs at.

(A small section of his brain is reminded of Oboro, who was always able to sense when Hizashi's energetic enthusiasm was getting to be too much, always able to settle him and redirect his attention until he calmed down.)

They're clearly familiar with each other. Hopefully the friendship—if *that's* what that was—between them will reduce the problem children's trouble rather than multiply it, but that seems to be an unlikely expectation.

Shouta waits for the students to notice him and settle. Eight seconds, not too bad to start, but they'll have to get better. He tells them so. Then he directs them to grab their gym uniforms and meet him on the field for his annual Quirk assessment.

(He ignores the flash of *something* passing over Izuku's face at the sight of him and hopes it wasn't recognition.)

Contrary to popular belief amongst his students, Shouta doesn't really care about the *strength* of his students Quirks. It would be rather hypocritical of him, after all, since his own Quirk would not give him any obvious advantage on any of the physical assessments. A Quirk is only a tool in a hero's arsenal, and Shouta is only concerned with how his students use those tools to their advantage when they approach these tests. While some Quirks act like a hammer and are simple to use to one's advantage—Bakugou's Explosion, for example—he's curious to see how the kids with less offensively oriented Quirks hold themselves in this situation. Their potential lies not in the strength of their Quirks but in the creativity of how they use them.

He's slightly surprised when the designated problem students are the first out of the locker rooms. Bakugou strides forward like he's walking into a battle he has already won, with an unearned cockiness that Shouta's eager to wring out of him over the course of the year. Izuku, at his side, is shyer in his gait, glancing behind himself periodically to stare incredulously at the exterior of the school behind him. Shouta recognizes the look in his eyes as disbelief, as if he's amazed he has gotten this far.

When they approach, Izuku nods respectfully in greeting and not-so-subtly kicks Bakugou in the shin when his friend tilts his chin upward haughtily. Shouta returns the nod, acknowledges their efficiency being the first on the field, and looks away from Izuku's imploring, searching gaze as he waits for the rest of the students.

The two students bicker, one more quietly than the other, as the others start to join the group. Bakugou promises that, whatever competition will be, he will pound the 'extras' into the dust and be the best. More gently, Izuku says, "Kacchan, we don't even know what we're doing yet. Besides," and suddenly a determined smile stretches across his face, "I'll be sure to give you a run for your money, so watch me." Bakugou responds with his own devious sneer.

(That determination, that excited grin, is so *achingly* familiar.)

He uses Bakugou for his demonstration, since he scored in the top 5 and his Explosion can clearly show the difference a Quirk can make in a physical assessment. The student's realization that they're free to use their Quirks however they please is accompanied with their cheers of excitement, but Shouta goes cold when he hears someone use the word 'fun.'

"Fun? Hero work isn't playtime. If you're here for fun, you're in the wrong profession. Whoever shows the least amount of potential and ends up in last place will be expelled."

As expected, this receives a chorus of protests from his students, but Shouta does not make empty threats. It's for good reason. A hero that doesn't take his job seriously is a dead hero, and he refuses for any of his students to end up that way.

(He thinks of a student—a *friend*—crushed beneath the weight of a building and the weight of others' failures.)

The fear of expulsion has created a more serious atmosphere over the students. Only Bakugou is seemingly immune, unconcerned by the

threat as he faces each challenge head-on and usually with a cry of 'DIE!' to accompany him. At least, Shouta admits, his confidence isn't entirely unfounded, even if it is a bit premature. He scores high on all of the tests, even the ones that his Quirk isn't useful for. He's clearly been training his body alongside his Quirk, which at *least* says something about his determination to succeed.

The rest of the students perform reasonably well, too. The versatility of Yaoyorozu's Quirk easily lands her in the top scores of each test, and Todoroki has obviously trained his own Quirk for years and has an incredible grasp on his ice, although Shouta will need to address his hesitation of using fire, since he seems to avoid it at every opportunity. Izuku pauses before each of his tests, as if analyzing the best approach to each situation, which is wonderfully refreshing from a student. For the long jump, he's so deep in thought that Shouta has to call a tired "Shirakumo!" when he misses his turn.

(He doesn't realize until then that it's the first time he has referred to Izuku by his family name, even mentally. Calling him Shirakumo only solidifies the connection between Izuku and Oboro when Shouta is doing everything in his power to distance his student from a ghost.)

"Sensei?" Izuku calls as he approaches the sand pit. "The only objective is to not touch the ground, right?"

"That is correct."

Izuku grins, his eyes streaming with dense fog as a small, misty platform hovers in front of him. He hops vertically, landing on it easily, then forms another platform just a couple inches away which he steps onto. From the sidelines, Bakugou curses. "Little shit's just gonna go forever," he growls as Izuku easily walks over the sand and further across the field, creating footholds of fog under each step.

Shouta gives him a score of infinity for the long jump.

The ball throw is the last test of the assessment, and Shouta has Bakugou go again to be fair to the other students. Grinning, Bakugou shakes out his arms. "I'll put my last score to shame," he promises, then launches the ball with a bang.

It makes it only 19.7 meters.

For a moment, everyone is silent, staring at where the ball fell in the dirt after colliding with a wall of fog. Then, Bakugou whirls on Izuku, palms popping with explosions. "Shitty fuckin' Deku, what the fuck

wa-!"

Instinctively, Shouta lashes out with his capture weapon and restrains Bakugou before he can land a hit. His eyes flare red to keep Bakugou from burning through the capture weapon with his explosions. "No unauthorized Quirk use to injure another student, Bakugou."

"Hah?! I wasn't gonna do anything! And he used his Quirk first!"

Well, that is technically correct. "Shirakumo, explain."

(Oh, how that name *burns* like poison spilling from his mouth.)

Izuku shuffles shyly. "Well, my Quirk is only helpful in some of the tests, and I *really* don't want to be expelled after working so hard to get here, but then I realized that I don't necessarily have to use my Quirk to help myself. I just need to do better than my opponents. So, I sabotaged Kacchan's ball toss."

"Do you think heroics is just a game to be won?"

Breaking eye contact, Izuku clenches his fists. "I'm fully aware that being a hero isn't a game, and that it's dangerous. I *know* you're aware of what happened to my brother, Eraserhead-sensei." Shouta hasn't told his students his hero name yet. Izuku definitely recognizes him, then. "I also know that, in a fight, it's not always enough to give yourself every possible advantage. You have to disadvantage your opponent at every opportunity. That can make the difference between victory and loss."

("...you're aware of what happened to my brother....")

Definitely a Problem Child.

But at least he's an interesting one.

Nodding, Shouta releases Bakugou from the capture weapon.

"Shirakumo's reasoning is correct, so I'll allow it this once. But I do wish to see how your peers perform without any interference, so please refrain from doing that again."

"Yes, sensei."

"Bakugou, your turn is over. Your score stands at 19.7 meters. Kirishima, you're up."

Grumbling, Bakugou stomps back toward Izuku, but he doesn't seem

inclined to attack, so Shouta just lazily watches them from the corner of his eye. Izuku smiles at his friend bashfully but doesn't flinch from the blonde's glare. Eventually, Bakugou huffs, loses steam, and watches the rest of the students finish their assessment with Izuku.

When the students finish, he sends them back to the locker room while he looks over the scores. He had promised to expel the student with the least potential, and he'd meant it, but that didn't *necessarily* translate to the student ranking in last place like he'd implied. After all, Hagakure Toru's Quirk hadn't been well suited to any of the tests, but she maintained an upbeat attitude throughout the assessment and genuinely seemed to try her best despite the odds. She didn't deserve to be expelled just because invisibility didn't grant her any form of super strength or speed. She had the potential to make a decent underground hero.

Instead, Shouta places Mineta Minoru in the lowest position. His Quirk is interesting, in all fairness, but the boy has an annoying, whiney personality that Shouta really doesn't want to deal with for the rest of the year. And he's pretty sure he'd seen him leering perversely at some of the girls during the assessment, and that's *definitely* something Shouta doesn't want to deal with for the rest of the year. In all honestly, Mineta is lucky Shouta can only expel him.

The scores are displayed neatly on the chalkboard by the time the students return to the classroom. The Todoroki boy is the first one back, and he only glances neutrally at the scores as he takes his seat, seemingly disinterested in his placement as runner-up. Yaoyorozu at least appears excited about her ranking highest in the class.

Bakugou, seeing his name listed in fourth, spins on Izuku behind him. "I won, nerd! We're watching the original All Might movie tonight, and *you're* buying the snacks."

Izuku, who placed sixth, hums. "You did beat me, but Kacchan, didn't you say you'll beat everyone else? You didn't even make the top three."

"Huh?! You're the one that needs to do better, Deku! I won't be a hero partner with anyone less than the best, ya hear me?! It's gotta be us two at the top, so meet me there."

("Let's form an agency, the three of us. We'll be a team!")

"You have to actually *be* at the top for me to meet you there, Kacchan."

Shouta is thankful, like he is every year, that the desks are resistant to most types of damage, because otherwise Bakugou would be destroying his much more effectively. He's too exasperated to put a stop to it, though, and Bakugou isn't hurting anyone, so he just lets him wear himself out.

The rest of the students trail in slowly, most looking relieved by their placements above last place. When Mineta finally stumbles in and stares at the board in horror, Shouta just points at the door and he leaves in a stunned daze. Now there'll be an open spot in his class for Hitoshi to transfer into. His kid just needs to prove his worth at the Sports Festival, and everything will fall neatly into place.

"That's all I expect of you for today. Take a syllabus on your way out and come prepared tomorrow." He grabs his sleeping bag and goes to wait for Hitoshi in the teacher's lounge.

When the day is finally over, him and Hitoshi walk back to their house nearby, and Hitoshi tells him about his day, promising that everyone left Hizashi's class with their eardrums still intact at the end of the day. Then, he asks about Shouta's day, and Shouta only huffs in reply.

Hitoshi rolls his eyes. "I bet all those hero kids are damn annoying, huh? Everything handed to them on a silver platter with their perfect Qui—"

Shouta slaps him upside the head—gently. "You're too bitter," he scolds, and Hitoshi sighs.

"Okay, maybe only *most* of them are like that," he acquiesces. Shouta doesn't argue this, since it's partly true. "Hey, are there any cute boys in your class? There's no one really that cute in gen-ed, but maybe there's someone in the other courses..."

"Hitoshi, it would be unethical of me as a teacher to say that any of the literal children in my class qualify as cute. If you want to answer that, you'll have to meet them yourself."

(He briefly considers introducing Hitoshi to Izuku and wonders if the attraction to Shirakumo boys is a trait that will run in the Aizawa family. He says nothing of it.)

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

(Encouragement from a ghost, long ago: “You’re the only one who can protect everyone! You can do it, Shouta!”)

He cannot fail these kids.

Chapter Notes

i rewrote this a few times over, and i'm relatively happy with how it turned out. i know the USJ incident can be kind of boring to read, because its been written so many times in AU fics, but hopefully I did my best to keep it interesting!

also this is the chapter where some manga spoilers come into play, so be wary! nothing is explicitly spoiled, but its def hinted at

All Might is certainly... a teacher.

Shouta doesn't know what adjective preceding 'teacher' can be accurate without being cruel.

The drill he runs with the students on their first day of Heroics is sloppy at best. To pit children with no combat training against each other is far from anything Shouta had recommended when All Might had asked his advice, yet it's what the hero decided to do anyway.

At least the footage is valuable for Shouta, since he can analyze his students for their inherent weaknesses and strengths, and he can work with them from there. The students, though, don't gain anything from it aside from a few serious bruises and, in Izuku's case, burns.

(A dark turtleneck and black, baggy pants lined with pockets tucked into glaring red high-tops. Red tinted aviator goggles pushing back curly green hair lined with fog. A *painfully* familiar bomber jacket, forest green instead of that dark brown. A nitroglycerin-fueled explosion, and the building crashes down around him. It happened again, again, *again...*)

Thankfully, no one was seriously hurt in the chaos, but Shouta is sure All Might will try actual training next time after his reprimands. His teaching career at UA has so far only served to be a nuisance—Shouta and Hizashi spent their morning before classes attempting to diffuse a

swarm of reporters, for instance, and he had to deal with the fallout when they somehow broke through the gate—and so far, Shouta is inclined to believe that All Might will only be more trouble than he's worth. He'll have the chance to prove his capability as a teacher at the Unforeseen Simulation Joint.

Of course, he would have actually needed to *show up* to the USJ for that to happen. Instead, the buffoon used up all his time for the day and will no longer be making an appearance, leaving Shouta and Thirteen to handle nineteen rowdy kids by themselves. Ridiculous. The training is already off to a poor start.

Things get much worse.

Izuku, surprisingly, is the first to sense something is off. All day, his excitement for the rescue training has been visible, and he's been watching Thirteen with sheer amazement since they walked into the USJ, but suddenly his attention is fully diverted. His head whips to the side, staring towards the center of the plaza. Shouta instinctively follows his gaze, but nothing is there.

Then, something *is* there.

A thick, black fog is forming in the center of the plaza, expanding rapidly. Confused, Shouta glances to Izuku, but his student looks just as alarmed as he feels. Not his doing, then.

Kirishima, unable to read a room, asks if this is the start of the training exercise. Bakugou answers for Shouta, more crudely than anything he would have said, and Shouta watches as people—*villains*—begin to step through the darkness.

Not just a fog. A warp gate.

"Hm?" One of the villains scans the group of teachers and students wearily. "Wasn't All Might supposed to be here today? We came here to kill him, after all."

Of course. All of Shouta's problems lately tie back to that buffoon.

"Thirteen, stay back with the students. Try to get a signal out to UA. I'll handle this."

"Wait, Sensei!" Shouta turns. Izuku stands at the front of the cluster of students. His hands are shaking. "You can't erase that many Quirks! Fighting so many opponents at once..."

Scoffing, Shouta pulls his goggles over his eyes, tucks his face into his scarf, and hopes that is enough to conceal his internal trepidations. He can't let his students think he lacks confidence right now. "You can't be a hero with just one trick. Thirteen, I'm leaving them to you."

Ignoring the protests behind him, he darts into the epicenter.

Unfortunately, Izuku is right in his assessment of Eraserhead's capabilities. Shouta is not suited to directly fight so many enemies at once. He became an underground hero, specifically for that reason, and preferred ambush and stealth tactics over a full-out brawl. But his students are depending on him right now, and he can't afford to fail.

(Encouragement from a ghost, long ago: "You're the only one who can protect everyone! You can do it, Shouta!")

He'll fight them with everything he has. He won't lose.

He easily falls into a rhythm, surprised to realize that the entirety of these villains' strength is in their numbers. Their combat abilities are subpar, and he easily restrains and incapacitates them with a single hit. When he's knocked most of them down, a scrawny man gripped by several disembodied hands rushes him.

He's the leader.

Shouta lunges for him, throwing out his capture weapon and using it for leverage to yank himself closer. Once he's in range, he shoves his elbow into the man's stomach.

Only for it to be stopped by the palm of a hand.

"It's hard to tell with you moving so much," the leader rasps in Shouta's ear. A sudden, searing pain begins spreading from his elbow, and Shouta gasps. "But your hair falls every time you finish erasing a Quirk. It's happening more often the longer you fight."

Ripping himself from that awful grasp, Shouta jumps backwards. The skin on his arm has eroded, leaving exposed muscle and bone behind, but he can only cover it with his other hand as more villains lunge for him. He fights them off, giving himself some space, but his eyes burn and his lungs heave by the time he pushes them back.

"Your Quirk just isn't suited for a fight like this, is it? This is too different from the short, ambush fights you're good at. So why did you jump in so quickly, Eraserhead? Was it just to put your students at

ease?”

Yes.

“By the way,” and now there’s a looming presence behind him, something *big*, “I’m not the final boss.”

A monster reaches for him, and he can do *nothing*. Everything goes red.

The next instant, Shouta is face down on the ground, the heavy weight of the beast pinning down his lower half. Blood drips from his forehead and into his eyes, and Shouta is suddenly aware that his goggles are missing.

Then, he’s aware only of the splitting pain racing through his arm as the beast snaps his bone.

He thinks the leader is talking, has been talking, but Shouta’s awareness is hazy. It’s all he can do to even hold onto consciousness, but *he needs to focus*.

“...wonderful power, but it’s not very impressive. When faced with such overwhelming power, you might as well be Quirkless.”

No, his Quirk isn’t anything special, but it’s *something*. Desperately, Shouta manages to lift his head. He activates Erasure and attempts to remove the beast’s strength.

His other arm is broken in retaliation.

Even with his Quirk erased, that monster stepped on his arm like it was nothing more than a twig. It’s just that strong.

Right now, Shouta is utterly powerless. He is weak. When it grabs his head, Shouta can do absolutely nothing as it slams him into the concrete below.

Except his head collides with something much too soft to be the stone pathway of the USJ plaza. Opening his eyes, he can only see hazy green before it abruptly fades away, and he gently falls the short distance to the pavement below.

(*A cloud, a cloud, a cloud.*)

The villain blinks, confused, and scratches at his neck. “Where did that... Who...?”

Suddenly, a figure composed of black smoke appears beside him, interrupting the villain's agitation. Shouta, though, squints, because he knows one person who could...

There, in the water and only barely out of sight, crouch Izuku and Asui.

"Tomura, I incapacitated Thirteen and dispersed most of the students. However, one of the ones I missed managed to escape."

The frantic scratching picks up pace. "If you weren't our way out, I would crush you to pieces," the villain—*Tomura*—growls. "We can't win this when the other pros show up. It's game over. Let's go home."

They're leaving? If their goal was only to kill All Might, then there was nothing for them here without him. But they've already caused this much trouble.... It wasn't adding up.

"Oh, before we go..." Faster than Shouta can follow in his addled state, Tomura lunges toward the water.

He's going for the kids.

"Let's kill some little heroes."

Tomura reaches for Izuku, for Shirakumo, with that hand that makes flesh flake from bone, and

(smiling face, never to smile again, dead, Shirakumo Oboro is dead)

Shouta erases his Quirk before he can make contact.

"Dammit," Tomura growls, letting his hand fall away from Izuku's horrified, thankfully uninjured, face. "You really are cool, Eraserhead."

This time when the monster cracks his skull against concrete, there's no cloud to cushion the impact. The pain is astonishing, and while he fights to stay conscious, it takes more energy than he currently has to lift his head again. But he remembers that he still has two students, nearly defenseless, only inches from a villain that could kill them with a single touch, and he picks himself up anyway.

His eyes take a second to focus, and during that time Shouta can only see blurs of movement across from him. In the next instant, the excruciating weight on his back suddenly disappears, and he can

register the scene before him.

A veil of fog has rolled in front of Tomura, obscuring the lake from view. The Nomu crashes forward and punches at the ground, splitting the stone with its force, and the fog is blown away. Asui and Izuku are already gone.

Shouta only gets a moment of relief, though, before a shuddering crash echoes across the USJ.

Struggling, he tries to sit himself up further to see what's going on, but his eyes refuse to focus once again. He thinks he can see the lumbering shape of the monster, and hear Tomura's excited laughter, but he doesn't know the details, and everything is wrong.

Then, a gentle hand settles on his shoulder, turning him onto his back as his head is cushioned by something soft. "It's okay, Aizawa-sensei. All Might's here. He's fighting the Nomu right now, but he led them away a bit, so we're gonna stay with you. Everyone's okay."

(A cloud... Oboro?)

Fog. Izuku.

Shouta's eyes finally focus, and he finds Izuku's face hovering over his. When he attempts to sit up again, he can barely find the energy, his body is screaming in agony, and he's easily pushed back down by a pair of hands. He looks okay, maybe a little pale and his voice sounded raspy, but not injured as far as he can tell. Asui is beside him, and she seems fine too.

"They're saying that Nomu can kill All Might, *kero*," Asui croaks.

"It blew away all the fog with a punch," Izuku whispers. Why did his voice sound like that, so raspy? Was it because of the ringing in Shouta's ears? "I've only ever seen All Might do something like that before."

There's a thundering crash nearby, and Shouta's head splits with pain.

"The Nomu's... really strong."

Shouta can hear All Might threatening the villains, but his voice is too strained to be of any weight. Judging by the troubled looks on his students' faces, things are not going well.

“You... need to go,” he rasps. If he and All Might died here, at least his kids might get out safe.

“Sorry, Eraser, but we’re not going to leave you here.” Beside Izuku, Asui nods resolutely in agreement.

If they survive today, they’d be good heroes.

“...to close the gate and tear you apart is my job.”

Izuku flinches, and Shouta can see tears building along his bottom lashes. “Kurogiri has All Might trapped in a warp gate... but it feels really similar to my fog? Maybe I can- *Kacchan!*”

An explosion rattles Shouta’s skull, and the pain is too much. He loses himself.

When he comes to, chaos is still happening around him. How much time has he lost? *How many kids has he lost?*

(dead, dead, dead, they’re dead)

“Kacchan!” Izuku shouts. He and Asui are still with Shouta, safe.

Why is he calling for Bakugou?

A slew of green fog manifests in the corner of his vision but is abruptly broken by a large figure barreling through it. A shocked, “What the hell?!” gasps from beside Shouta, and he realizes Bakugou is suddenly laid out flat beside him.

“Kacchan! Are you alright?”

“Fucker didn’t even touch me.”

“Thank you for slowing it down, young Shirakumo! It gave me more time to get your friend out of the way.”

Finally, Shouta tracks down the behemoth of All Might, finding him at the end of a trail of debris with his arms crossed defensively over his chest. He is breathing heavily, and blood trickled from a cut on his eyebrow. He took a hit to protect Bakugou, Shouta realizes. Maybe Shouta can find some respect for him deep in his heart after all.

People are talking now, but he doesn’t know what they’re saying. Why can’t he focus? He doesn’t even realize that his consciousness is fading until cool hands pat his cheeks, cautiously mindful of any open

wounds. “Sorry, Aizawa-sensei,” Izuku whispers, “but you should really stay awake right now.”

“I think Sensei fell asleep earlier, kero, but we really shouldn’t let it happen again.”

Bakugou stumbles to his feet. “I’m going to-” and Shouta finds enough will to slap his capture weapon around all three of his nearby students.

“Sensei!”

“None of you,” he wheezes, “are going *anywhere*.”

When did Bakugou even *get* here? Izuku called out to him right before Shouta blacked out, he thinks, but what did he *do* in the time Shouta lost awareness? Were the other students in the middle of all this too? Were they safe? Shouta can hear voices nearby, one of them undeniably All Might’s booming tone, but he can’t pin the others.

He has eyes on just three of his students right now. They are the ones he can protect, so he will keep them close.

Bakugou is the only one who actually attempts to wrestle his way out of the scarf, but its grip only tightens, and its fabric is fireproof, so Shouta’s sure he’s not going anywhere. Neither Asui nor Izuku fight the restraint, their attention locked on the battle that Shouta can only hear right now, his vision fading once again.

And it’s *loud*. Every crash of force cracks painfully against his head, but Izuku is absentmindedly tapping a rhythm against his shoulder, giving Shouta something to focus on so he can stay awake. He *has* to stay awake. If All Might fails, he needs to be able to protect these kids.

Somehow.

(“You’re the only one who can protect everyone!”)

“Oi, Deku, you’re gonna pass out. Stop it.”

Shouta hazily shifts his gaze toward Izuku. His eyes are flaring with fog as he watches the fight. He must be using his Quirk, *over*-using it.

When Izuku speaks, his voice sounds like he hasn’t had a drink of water for weeks. “I can slow them down,” he rasps. “All Might... he’s struggling. I can tell. If I can help, even a little...”

“Shirakumo, you’re hurting yourself.”

Asui’s right. Izuku is so, so pale, swaying dangerously. Shouta so desperately wants to erase Izuku’s Quirk, prevent him from falling into the dangerous pit of Quirk Exhaustion, but he *can’t do anything*.

Bakugou can, though. With his arms still restrained by Shouta’s capture weapon, he rears back and headbutts Izuku hard in the forehead. Immediately, the fog in Izuku’s eyes fizzles out as he yelps in surprise. “Shitty Deku! Fuckin’ stop that. All Might’s the best, he doesn’t *need* help.”

“Young Bakugou is correct,” All Might booms, loudly enough that Shouta can hear him over the ringing in his ears. “All of you, stay back.”

“But All Might-”

“I appreciate all your help, Young Shirakumo. Thanks. But it’s fine. Just watch as a pro gives it everything he’s got.”

Wait. Hadn’t Thirteen said All Might ran out of time earlier? If that was true, then he’s at his limit.

Shakily, Shouta fights against every cell in his body and sits up. He can get to his feet, he can protect his kids-

The Nomu and All Might collide. The impact explodes outward, blowing everybody back. Running on pure adrenaline, Shouta forces himself to land on his feet, buckling under his own weight until Izuku props a shoulder under his armpit to support him. Further away, he sees Asui, Todoroki and Kirishima—*they were here too? Just how many kids has he failed today?*—caught by soft clouds of green fog. Izuku wobbles, almost sending Shouta down with him, but Bakugou appears in front of them, supporting their weight against his back with a muttered curse.

“We’re going,” Aizawa decides, but it’s a futile effort. Only Izuku and Bakugou can hear him over the deafening winds caused by the battle, and he can’t even move, not when his students are the only reason he’s able to brace himself against the extreme force threatening to push him back.

“Go beyond! Plus Ultra!”

And the Nomu explodes against the side of the dome.

In the center of the plaza, smoke rolls off of All Might as he threatens the remaining villains. “He’s out of time...”

Izuku and Bakugou snap their attention to Shouta, catching him when his attempt to take a step ends with him slumping pathetically. “He can’t... He’s bluffing.”

“Tomura Shigaraki, if we work together, we can still kill him.”

The villains charge. They’ll kill him.

Uselessly, Shouta fails again to move. “He’s at his limit.”

“Deku.”

“Right.”

Suddenly, All Might is obscured by green fog, and Bakugou grabs Izuku by the waist as he falls bonelessly. Kurogiri’s mist slams against the edge of the modified smokescreen, seemingly unable to breach it, and Shigaraki stutters to stop.

“His gates... they’re just humidity,” Izuku rasps without even lifting his head, “like mine. But I can’t do anything with them, so I hoped he can’t do anything to my fog.”

“Nice going, nerd.”

“This fog... it’s a cheat code.” Shigaraki whips around, his eyes latching in their direction. “You’re *cheating*.”

Hands outstretched, Shigaraki springs toward them, toward Izuku *again*. Bakugou frees one arm from Izuku’s waist, readying an explosion, and Shouta prepares himself for the worst pain in his life so he can activate Erasure. He might only be able to use it for a moment, before his injuries overwhelm him, but if he times it right-

A shot rings out, and Shigaraki’s hand is blasted away. Another shot, and Shigaraki hops backwards to dodge it.

Somewhere, Shouta hears the familiar yell of Hizashi using his Quirk and realizes that the other heroes are here. They’re safe now.

Bakugou jostles him against his back. “Oi, you better be awake back there. Deku’s slipping, but he didn’t get his head cracked like you did, so it’s whatever.”

"I'm fine, Kacchan," Deku slurs. His fog surrounding All Might is thinning. Kurogiri has already backed away, beckoning Shigaraki toward a portal forming between them. Shouta understands that they're escaping, and that should be bad, but right now he just wants them as far from his kids as possible.

They disappear. Izuku, with a shuddering breath, releases the fog, revealing All Might in the center for a split second before a wall of concrete appears around him. Or, rather, revealing the emaciated form of *Toshinori*.

"That... *All Might*?" Izuku gasps. Then, he goes limp.

(dead, dead, is he dead? has he killed another shirakumo?)

"Fucker fell asleep." Bakugou curses as the sudden weight finally drags all three of them to the ground. Shouta, exhausted from fighting gravity for so long, lets himself slip off of Bakugou's form to lay flat on the ground. Neither of them say anything as they wait, but Shouta is sure that he'll have to deal with the Problem Children's questions when they're aware enough to actually ask them.

Shuzenji finally shows up, Hizashi trailing at her heels. "Oh dear, if I had known this was your condition, I would've checked on you first."

He's carefully loaded onto a stretcher by Hizashi while Bakugou explains that Izuku's isn't physically injured, but is probably severely dehydrated from Quirk Exhaustion. "The kids..."

"The little listeners are all okay, Shouta," Hizashi reassures.

"I'll heal your head trauma, and then you can rest, Aizawa."

Shouta feebly stops Shuzenji before she can touch him. "Wait, Hizashi. Hitoshi..."

"I'll get him to the hospital, no problem."

"Tell him it's just a red. Not a black."

"Code red, not black, got it."

Shuzenji kisses him on the forehead, and Shouta finally can sleep.

Shouta wakes up in the hospital. In the chair beside him, Hitoshi drops his phone into his lap and looks up when Shouta shuffles in the bed. “Holy shit, Dad. You had to try and get yourself killed on a *field trip*?”

“Shut up, brat.” Despite the taunt, Shouta can see the redness of Hitoshi’s eyes, how his fingers white-knuckle the bar of the hospital bed as he helps Shouta sit up.

Considering his physical state at the USJ, Shouta feels relatively okay. His whole body aches, his arms especially, and his head is still pounding, but he can tell several people with healing Quirks have had a go at him. He can feel the familiar itch of gauze around his torso, and the stiffness around his arms are probably from casts, but that’s all he can visibly see wrong with him.

“What even *happened*? There was just an announcement across the school, and all our teachers left, and suddenly Uncle Zashi was telling me it was a code red. I didn’t know what was going on.”

“Villains attacked USJ. They were after All Might, *who wasn’t even there*, and it was just Thirteen and I against all of them with nineteen minors in the area with us. We had to defend ourselves until help arrived which... took longer than expected.” When Hitoshi doesn’t respond, Shouta lifts a plaster-wrapped arm and sets it softly on his head. “I’m okay.”

“I know,” he snuffles, and Shouta allows him a moment to collect himself, knowing his son was uncomfortable with vulnerability. In fairness, Shouta wasn’t exactly an expert of emotions either.

Eventually, Hitoshi straightens his hunched shoulders and swipes Shouta’s arm from his hair. “Zashi went to get coffee. He’ll probably be back soon, if he didn’t get lost somewhere.”

“Do you know how everyone else is?”

Hitoshi scoffs. “I’m sure all the special little baby heroes are just fine.”

“*Hitoshi.*”

“No one’s told me anything, okay? I didn’t even know what happened to *you*. Just ask Zashi when he gets back.”

So, Shouta waits for Hizashi to return from his coffee run which takes long enough that it seems likely that he really had gotten lost. He knows Shuzenji said everyone was fine, but he's antsy. What if something changed in the time he's been asleep? He just wants some confirmation that, despite his shortcomings, the kids were all okay.

Finally, Hizashi walks through the door. Unfortunately, he startles at the sight of Shouta sitting up in bed and drops his coffees on the floor. Hitoshi cries in outrage, staring at the cups spilling across the floor while Hizashi clutches his heart and takes a stuttering breath. "Shouta! You were supposed to be asleep for like two more hours or something."

"Are the kids alright? Thirteen?"

Hizashi stoops to pick up the coffee, attempting to kick the liquid back into the cups, which obviously isn't working. "Everyone's fine. Shirakumo is the only one that was hospitalized, and he only needed treatment for dehydration although it was pretty nasty. They'll have him on an IV for the rest of the night, then he'll be just fine."

Sighing, Shouta lets himself relax. No one died. He didn't fuck up too badly.

A thought strikes him. "Did you see Inko? How was she?" The last time he'd seen Mrs. Shirakumo was months before Oboro's death. She was a sweet woman, a bit fretful at times, but always unbearably kind to her son's misfit friends.

Hizashi glances at Hitoshi. "Not a word of this, Mini-Shou. This is confidential information about students, got it?"

Hitoshi mimes zipping his lips, not even looking up from his phone.

Confirming that Hitoshi wouldn't spread any of Izuku's personal information, Hizashi leans toward Shouta like he's about to tell a secret. "Inko didn't show up."

"Huh?" That couldn't be right.

"Bakugou Mitsuku and Bakugou Masaru are Shirakumo's emergency contacts on school record. I think the hospital might've called Inko, but as far as I know she hasn't been by. Just the Bakugou family."

"Have you talked to them?"

“Not me,” Hizashi admits. “I saw them in the hallway earlier, but they seemed pretty determined to just get to Shirakumo’s room so I didn’t wanna annoy them. Nezu must’ve talked to them, though.”

“That’s weird,” Shouta admits. He remembers Inko as being almost overly protective of Oboro. It didn’t seem to fit her character to not visit Izuku in the hospital.

“I know, right? Doesn’t sound like her, but I guess we haven’t seen her in a while, huh?”

Shouta can’t really argue with that.

That night, after Hizashi was shooed away by the same exasperated nurses who Shouta almost hissed at until they let Hitoshi continue sleeping in the chair beside his bed, Shouta’s door creaks open. He’s awake, with the ache in his arms being a bit too much for him to sleep comfortably, and he’s glad for it when he sees Izuku’s head peek into the room.

His eyes widen when he realizes that Shouta is looking back at him.

“C’mere, Problem Child,” he whispers, beckoning Izuku forward with a stiff wave of a bandaged arm. For a moment, Izuku looks to consider bolting back out the door, but he drags his feet to Shouta’s bedside in the end. Illuminated only by the dimmed light of a lamp, Shouta is pleased to see that Hizashi’s statement that Izuku was uninjured seems to be correct.

“Hi, Sensei,” he greets awkwardly. “Who’s that?”

“That’s my son. Nothing can wake him up when he’s out like that, so don’t worry about him. Sit down.”

Izuku does so.

“Why are you here?”

“Just wanted to make sure you were alright,” he murmurs. “I’m sorry.”

Shouta almost snorts. “For what?”

Shrugging, Izuku gestures feebly at Shouta's wounds. "You got hurt."

"That's not your fault, kid. Actually, the doctor said if I had taken another hit to the head by that Nomu, I would've been a lot worse off, and my Quirk could've been damaged. The only reason that isn't the case is because you intercepted the blow and cushioned it." Izuku blinks in surprise. "You did a good job, kid. If anything, I should be apologizing for not better protecting my students."

"But, Sensei, you did protect us! You were amazing! You fought all those guys even though you were so outnumbered, and you beat them all! I've never seen anything like that!"

("You're amazing, Shouta!")

"I actually wanted to thank you," Izuku continues, bowing his head so the wisps of his hair fell over his eyes. "I'm glad all of my friends got out safely, and I know that was all because of you. Thank you, Sensei."

"It's my job, kid." He would do it all again in a heartbeat.

"It's more than that." Shouta is shocked, momentarily, by the conviction in Izuku's voice. "I could've.... What happened to my brother, it could've happened to me, or to Kacchan, or any of us. We could've died. But you didn't let that happen."

Shouta *chokes*.

"I know you were close friends with Oboro. I know you were there when... I know being a hero is dangerous. I didn't really think I'd be in a situation like that for a while, though, but when you jumped in like that, I felt like me and my friends were safe."

Shouta thinks he's crying. He isn't sure. Izuku finally looks up, and his smile is wobbly but it's *there*.

("Just keep smiling, even when things look bad!")

"I'll be a hero like that someday. Someone who can make others feel safe just by their demeanor alone, that's the kind of hero I want to be. So, *really*, thank you for keeping us all safe, Sensei."

Before Shouta can say another word, before he can even *think* of a response, because his brain has stuttered to an abrupt halt, Izuku stands.

He leaves, and Shouta's mind reels.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Class 1-A is the predominant competition in the one-on-ones. Shouta's chest is warm from pride.

Then, he sees the match up for the fights, and his chest becomes decidedly less warm. Izuku and Hitsohi are paired for the first round.

Chapter Notes

shindeku finally meet (when both of them are conscious lol)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Returning to class the Monday following the USJ attack, with no days off for recovery, is not the recommended course of action by any of the medical staff, but Shouta does it anyway. He knows that the kids—both his students and Hitoshi—appreciate the attempt to retain normalcy after the unexpected events at the USJ. If he has to show up to his classes with both his arms in casts and drowsy on pain meds to achieve this illusion of stability and security, then that is a sacrifice he's willing to make.

("I felt like me and my friends were safe," Izuku had told him.)

It was for the same reason that he argued that the Sports Festival should continue as scheduled. His students have just experienced true vulnerability and helplessness, likely for the first time in their lives, and the Sports Festival will allow them to show their true strength and capabilities in a safe, controlled environment. Seeing their expressions after the announcement—the way Bakugou's jaw sets, how Uraraka's eyebrows furrow and Izuku's fists clench—Shouta knows he has made the right decision.

"Bakugou, Shirakumo, please stay behind for a moment. The rest of you, off to lunch."

As his class goes to leave, there's a commotion just outside the doors. Students from the other classes are gathered in the hallway, declaring rivalry for the Festival. Good, it'll give his class something normal to worry about, then. He can hear Hitoshi's voice out there too, but he turns his attention back to the Problem Students rather than listen in.

“I’m sure you both have plenty of questions.”

Bakugou scoffs, “Obviously.”

Ignoring him, Izuku leans over Shouta’s desk to peer at him curiously. “Are you alright? I didn’t think you’d still be in casts today.”

Shouta blinks, a little surprised. He’d expected them to ask questions about the USJ, specifically about All Might and his apparent frailty, but Izuku is concerned about *him*?

“I’m fine,” he answers slowly as his brain reboots. “The bones have been reset already, but the Quirk makes them fragile for a few days afterward. The casts are just to keep them from rebreaking. However, I’m sure you have additional questions of a more sensitive nature, in regards to what you see at the USJ.”

“You mean how All Might is apparently just some weak asshole playing make believe?”

“Kacchan! Don’t be rude.” Izuku elbows Bakugou in the gut, and Shouta is surprised that the blonde doesn’t retaliate with his own brand of violence and explosions. Instead, he grumbles something petulantly under his breath, and Izuku nudges him again, but friendlier this time. “We really looked up to All Might,” he explained, as if Bakugou’s comments had personally offended Shouta—they hadn’t—and he was attempting to excuse his behavior. “He was a great hero, *is* a great hero, but we can’t help feeling... I don’t even know. He’s always seemed so cool, but to know that this whole time, he was just... human like the rest of us...”

“It was all a load of bullshit and false bravado,” Bakugou growls.

Izuku glances at him, then finally shrugs in agreement. “I guess it just feels kind of deceitful? He’d always seemed so honest...”

“You just want to make sure we won’t run our mouths, right? Gotta make sure we keep precious All Might’s weakness a fucking secret?”

“Well, that *was* a concern among those who know,” Shouta admits, “which includes only the UA staff at this point in time. Can I take that to mean you won’t tell anybody, then?”

Shaking his head, Izuku nudges Bakugou again. “We won’t tell anyone. Right, Kacchan?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Shouta figures that's the best he'll get out of them, so he nods and sends them to join their friends in the lunchroom. If they have any other issues about this situation, All Might will have to deal with the Problem Children himself.

When the students return after lunch, Shouta is pleased to see their shoulders are set with renewed determination, likely due to their conversation with the other UA students. The competition from the other classes will do them some good, then.

By the time the Festival rolls around, Shouta is confident in his students' abilities. They'll do well.

He agrees to Hizashi's pleading to join him in the commentator box, mostly because it provides the best vantage point in the stadium with cameras positioned to feed them video of every moment from every angle. Hizashi *doesn't* tell him that he's expected to provide his own commentary on the events, but Shouta often finds Hizashi's remarks lacking any real analytical merit, so he chimes in when necessary. As expected, his students do exceedingly well in the first round's obstacle course, and all nineteen of them impressively make the cut to the second round. Todoroki ended in first and Bakugou in second, though they both wasted an illogical amount of time posturing and antagonizing each other in the minefield. They were interrupted only by Izuku as he ran over the mines on Quirk-made platforms, closing in on the finish line rapidly. Still, having three of his students over the finish line first, and almost half of the second round be consisted of his class, fills Shouta with a strong sense of pride.

Hitoshi, for his part, makes it to the second round as well, but only barely. Shouta has tried hard the last couple of weeks to convince Hitoshi to focus on his physical conditioning, since the hero course kids are on a rigorous training regimen and their abilities were at a level Hitoshi couldn't yet match, but his son didn't take Shouta's advice as seriously as he would've liked. Now, he is over reliant on his Quirk and the others' unawareness of its functionality. While this strategy could have merit in the other rounds, like the one-on-one matches in the third, it was relatively unhelpful in a competition like an obstacle course.

He made it, though, and Shouta just has to hope that his son's methods are adequate enough for him to prove his potential as a hero student.

Luckily, Hitoshi's reliance on his Quirk is at least helpful in the second round, when he can easily command other teams to pass over their headbands right before the time runs out, and he guarantees himself a spot in the third round. Several of Shouta's problem children have advanced as well, and Class 1-A is the predominant competition in the one-on-ones. Shouta's chest is warm from pride.

Then, he sees the match up for the fights, and his chest becomes decidedly less warm. Izuku and Hitoshi are paired for the first round.

Hizashi whistles under his breath, seeing the problem too. "Shirakumo versus Aizawa, take two." He ignores Shouta's correction that Hitoshi is technically Shinsou not an Aizawa. "The relatives of my high school best friends facing off. Who on Earth do I root for?"

"Izuku doesn't know Hitoshi's Quirk," Shouta says plainly.

Hizashi winces appropriately in response. "This is gonna be bad."

It is bad.

Shouta knows how the match will end before it even begins, when Izuku and Hitoshi step into the ring as Present Mic enthusiastically announces their entrance. Izuku is bouncing on his heels, smiling anxiously, and so, so eager to show his capabilities as a hero. In contrast, Hitoshi is infuriatingly aloof and brushes off Izuku's excitement with chilly nonchalance. Midnight calls for the match to start.

Izuku hops, forming an elevated platform beneath himself. Shouta knows his strategy, has seen him practice in the spars against his classmates. In the limited space of the ring, he's creating distance between himself and an unknown Quirk, staying out of range as best he can until he can appropriately gauge the best retaliation, and then he will attack from the high-ground.

When Shouta watched him do this during their training, as Izuku was sparring with and aerially dodging an irate Bakugou, he was incredibly proud of the logic in it. Unlike his peers with more offensive Quirks, Izuku can use Fog most effectively when he finds ways to use it creatively. In most situations, keeping a fair distance away from an opponent until there's an opportunity to strike would be very effective.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work well against a Quirk like Hitoshi's.

Hitoshi says something. He's sneering, but there are no mics close enough to the fight to pick up what he's saying. Whatever it is, though, causes Izuku to freeze in the air above him.

Hitoshi says something else.

Izuku responds.

It's over only seconds after it begins.

Smirking, Hitoshi obviously commands Izuku to walk out of bounds, and dispersing the cloud beneath himself, Izuku does as he was asked. Midnight calls the round.

There's a moment of silence, during which Hitoshi must release Izuku from his Quirk, because his blank expression suddenly shutters as he stares at the painted boundary behind himself, stunned. The crowd, obviously displeased by such a short and anticlimactic match, begins to boo, and Hitoshi takes a grandiose bow like a circus ringleader after a show.

Hizashi feebly tries to assure the crowd that, despite appearances, the match was not forfeited and was won due to a Quirk, but they continue to shout their displeasure. Red-faced and teary-eyed, Izuku hurriedly walks back into the hallway he came out from.

"He's really not like him at all," Hizashi murmurs under his breath, once the audience has settled and he's turned his microphone back off. Shouta only barely hears him.

"What do you mean?"

"Izuku. He doesn't act much like how I remember Oboro. He's quieter, more sensitive and skittish, don't ya think?"

"It's not like they grew up together," Shouta says, perhaps a little callously, but he's slowly realizing that Hizashi is right. They have their similarities, sure, with their physical appearance being the most notable, and that *smile*. Izuku is just as caring as Oboro, just as selfless and willing to risk his wellbeing to help others.

But their overall demeanor is drastically different. Oboro had always been so confident in himself, had always been so optimistic, had always been *smiling*. To see that bright, unabashed smile in Izuku, though, it often needed to be coaxed from him. Thinking about it now, Shouta thinks he's only seen his confidence—*really* seen it—when

Izuku was around Bakugou, or in battle. When he was fully relaxed, around what may be the one person he truly trusts, or when he was so deep in the energy of a fight that he paid his anxiety no attention.

Oboro was bold and confident.

Izuku is nervous and unsure.

Remembering Izuku's expression after his defeat, how he appeared so defeated, so hopeless, Shouta knows that he would take this harder than Oboro ever would have.

Shouta's phone pings. A message from Nezu, simply reading a number for a private room in the arena. Its meaning is clear.

Thank god for the rat and his multitude of cameras.

When he stands, Hizashi startles. "Hey, where ya goin'? You're gonna miss your students' matches! Maybe you really are a bad teacher after all, Eraserhead."

"Another student requires my attention," Shouta says, and immediately understanding, Hizashi waves him off.

As always, Nezu's information is reliable. When Shouta reaches the room bearing the same number from the message, he already knows something is wrong by the thin trails of mist leaking under the doorframe. He knocks lightly. "Shirakumo? It's Aizawa."

There is no verbal response, but Shouta hears a shuddering intake of breath. "I'm going to come in," he announces and opens the door slowly.

A layer of fog coats the floor of the small room, licking at Shouta's calves, and he can feel the chill of it even through the fabric of his jumpsuit. Izuku sits, up to his chin in the mist, with his back against the far wall and knees curled to his chest. Fog trickles from between his shut eyelids like gaseous tears, falling into the rolling sea below.

"S-sorry," he whimpers as Shouta steps closer and crouches across from him, sinking deeper into the cool fog until it climbs to his chest.

"Don't apologize. Just focus on calming yourself down and getting control of your Quirk for now."

Izuku flinches, so subtly that Shouta almost misses it, but he follows

Shouta's exaggerated breathing pattern until it becomes more steady. "Got a better grip on yourself, Problem Child?" Nodding, Izuku breathes deeply, and the sea of fog recedes until it's nothing more than a small puddle pooling around Izuku's hunched form. "There you go."

"Sorry, Sensei."

"Still no need to apologize, but I want to talk about what that was. I don't want you losing control of yourself again, though, so we're just going to have a rational conversation, alright?" Izuku nods, and his eyes are focused, his breathing is even, so Shouta forges ahead. "What caused that?"

"I lost," Izuku explained, simply, as if that logically warranted such an extreme loss of emotional control that he also lost control of his Quirk.

"Lots of kids lost today, but I haven't found them breaking down in a dark room." Again, Izuku winces, and Shouta hastily rephrases. "I don't mean that to say that you're weaker than them, Problem Child, or anything like that. I mean that there is clearly something else bothering you, something deeper, and I would like to know what that is."

Izuku buries his face in his knees, breathing heavier but still steady enough that Shouta doesn't interfere. He just waits.

Finally, Izuku exhales loudly and whimpers, "I've tried so hard, for so long, to be a hero, and I lost." Shouta is about to interrupt again, because this sounds like the same justification as before, but Izuku continues, "I didn't just *lose*. It was... it was awful. I thought this would be my chance to show that I can be strong, I can fight, I can be strong like my brother was, but I didn't even get the chance. A Quirk like that, that can take over someone's mind like that, it's..." Instinctively, Shouta braces himself for the inevitable Quirk bias, for the word 'villainous' to be spat from Izuku's mouth. Instead, "It's *amazing*. But I couldn't do anything! He was right. I'm so weak. I couldn't even try to fight, try to win, and I just... walked out of the ring. I forfeited."

"There were people rooting for me today. Those people that believed in me, even when everyone else... I let those people down today. I disappointed them. I'm always disappointing people, I'm *never* good enough, and this is just the proof that my mom was right, I can't-"

Izuku's breath stutters as he trips over his words, and Shouta snaps his

fingers near his ear sharply to recenter his attention. “Kid, breathe with me again. Recollect your thoughts. When your calm, you can continue. I’m listening.”

The next minute passes in relative silence, only the sound of slowing breaths filling the space.

“I’m sorry. Not for being upset,” he adds hastily, when Shouta is obviously about to interrupt irritably. “I’m sorry I disappointed you, Sensei. I really did try.”

Shouta sighs. What a Problem Child. “You didn’t disappoint me. None of my students did, and especially not you. I’ve seen the effort you put into your training, and I know it’ll be incredibly beneficial for you in the future, even if you didn’t get a chance to use it during the Sports Festival. Your first round was an unfortunate match-up, and you lost. It happens. Do you consider your peers who have also been eliminated to be disappointments?” Izuku shakes his head. “Hold yourself to the same standards, kid. No one’s disappointed in you.”

Again, they sit together in silence. Rationally, Shouta’s job has been done, and he should return to spectating the rest of the Festival, but he doesn’t want to break the quiet bubble of trust he and Izuku exist in.

Softly, as if he too is afraid to break the lull, Izuku says, “Oboro placed in both of his Sports Festivals.”

When it’s clear he’s waiting for a response, Shouta answers with his voice faintly tinged with emotion, “I know. I beat him our first year.”

Izuku laughs hesitantly—has he always been so hesitant, and Shouta’s not noticed? “My whole life, people have compared me to him. My *mom* can’t even look at me without seeing my brother, but I’m *not* him. I’m smaller. I’m weaker. My Quirk is just a worse version of his. But ever since I was a kid, I’ve always wanted to be a hero, be the hero he didn’t get the chance to be.

“I never met him, at least not when I was old enough to remember but my mom... everyone used to tell me stories, and he sounded like *everything* I wanted to be. Confident, strong, brave. Everything I’m not.” Izuku’s eyes clench shut as he inhales deeply, like he’s resetting his lungs’ rhythm. Shouta ignores the ache that’s growing in his chest—because that’s what he’s been doing all along isn’t it? Comparing Izuku to the ghost of his brother—and he waits.

“You were his friend. I’ve seen you in the old photo albums my parents had, you and Present Mic. You *know* he was great. I’ll never be him, but I wanted to prove that I could be just as good as he was. Or at least close. And I know Oboro didn’t die because he was weak... I *know* that. But when those villains attacked us... I felt so weak, and so helpless, like I could die just like he did. Then, out there today when Shinsou said... when he... I felt so helpless again. I was still too weak to do anything!

I thought if I could place in the Sports Festival, like Oboro did, then my mom would... I thought I could prove that I’m strong enough to do this. That I could be brave, and I could win. That I could be... just *enough*. Enough to be a hero. And I... I *lost*.”

Izuku is done, now, Shouta thinks, but he gives him a moment to breathe. “Izuku,” he calls, when the silence has stretched thin between them. “I feel I owe you an apology. Oboro was... a very dear friend of mine, and I admit that you remind me of him. But you’re not him, and you don’t deserve to be compared to someone you are not. You’re your own person, Izuku. You have your own unique merits and obstacles, and these don’t inherently make you a worse version of your brother. I’m sorry that I, or anyone else, have made you feel differently.

“You have nothing to prove. Not to me, or anyone else, including yourself. You’re a child who has recently experienced something traumatic. Even pro-heroes have emotions after something like that, and we all feel a little weak and helpless sometimes. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, but it’s necessary to overcome if you want to be a successful hero. Today, you lost a fight. Nothing more than that. Don’t assign unnecessary meaning to things, Problem Child. Tomorrow, you’ll get up and try again. Learn from this, and you won’t lose again.

“You might not feel like it, but you did good today. I’m certain that the people supporting you are proud of you.”

Wiping the gaseous tears from his eyes, Izuku chuckles weakly. “You were one of those people, Sensei.”

Briefly, Shouta squeezes his shoulder. “Don’t make a habit of fishing for compliments, brat, but I *am* proud of you. Now, if you’re done here, go back to your class. I have other students to watch in this festival, after all, and I can’t be playing favorites.” He quickly lifts the corners of his lips in the approximation of a smile, so Izuku knows he’s teasing.

“Right. Thank you, Sensei.”

When Izuku disappears down the hallway, returning to his peers, Shouta sighs. “Please, stop thanking me, kid.”

In the second round, the match between Hitoshi and Todoroki is a near exact replica of Izuku’s. The crowd jeers once again, upset at the lack of excitement, but both of the kids take it in stride. Hitoshi blows exaggerated kisses to the crowd—Shouta decides he’s been spending too much time with Hizashi—and Todoroki, although seeming surprised initially, leaves the arena with a neutral expression on his face.

Shouta does see, though, from his vantage point across the arena, Izuku stand hastily from his set among his classmates and disappear into the hallways of the arena once again. He hopes he is only going to commiserate with Todoroki. Nezu will send another text if he has to deal with any more issues, anyway.

Still, he finds himself relaxing when both Izuku and Todoroki return to their seats during the match between Tokoyami and Mina. Surprising, possibly, that the typically standoffish Todoroki elects to sit so closely to Izuku on the bench, their heads bowed together in seemingly intense conversation, but shared loss can oftentimes forge friendships. Shouta frankly doesn’t have the energy to deal with any other problems today if he can help it, so he simply elects to ignore it for now.

The semi-finals consist of Bakugou against Tokoyami, a match-up that heavily favors Bakugou, and Hitoshi against Iida. Shouta half-expects this match to be the one to finally show Hitoshi that he can’t be so dependent on his Quirk alone. Izuku is friendly with Iida, friendly enough that they’ve been chatting amicably with each other in the space between matches, so he’s had sufficient opportunity to inform his friend of the verbal activation of Hitoshi’s Quirk and give Iida the advantage. Once an enemy knows how Brainwashing functions, it’s easy to enough avoid, and Hitoshi hasn’t trained enough in physical combat to challenge Iida without it.

Shouta is almost disappointed that this apparently isn’t the case. Midnight begins the match, and when Hitoshi speaks, Iida answers without hesitation. Shouta is a bit concerned that all of his students don’t seem to be wary of the possibility of verbal Quirks. Maybe he’ll

introduce that into his curriculum this year.

Unsurprisingly, this fight ends the same way as the others, with Hitoshi's opponent walking out of the ring seemingly of their own accord. Once again, the crowd is very disappointed.

"Shouta," Hizashi whines. "Why is your kid's Quirk so *boring*?"

Glaring, Shouta turns on his mic. Might as well announce this across the stadium. "The capability to end a fight nonviolently is often underappreciated in the hero-world. Shinsou is performing to the best of his abilities and has subdued his opponents without injury. Show better respect to him and his opponents who have worked hard to be here today."

When Shouta turns the mic back off, and the crowd quiets, Hizashi still pouts. "Doesn't make for good television, though."

"Shut up, Hizashi."

His phone pings, another text from Nezu, and Shouta wonders which of his students is causing problems now. He expects a room number, or some other indication that there is an issue he needs to resolve. Instead, the message reads: *Iida Tenya will not be participating in the awards ceremony. His absence has been excused due to family emergency.*

Family emergency? Tensei?

(Has he lost another of his friends?)

Shouta doesn't think about it.

Bakugou wins his fight against Tokoyami easily, the light emitted by his explosions forcing Dark Shadow to retreat and Tokoyami to surrender. This means that Hitoshi will be facing Bakugou, Shouta's most aggressive student, in the finals.

Hizashi sighs. "Bakugou's way too rowdy. All Mini-You's gotta do is insult him and **BAM** it's all over... Some fight for the finals this year, I guess."

Initially, Shouta agrees. It's unfortunate, and a little frustrating, that Hitoshi will likely win this whole Festival by solely coasting with his Quirk and with minimal effort on his part. He's immensely proud of his son, of course. Since Shouta adopted him, Hitoshi has wanted nothing more than to be a hero, and his success in the Festival will

surely guarantee him a transfer into 1-A.

On the other hand, however, Shouta's seen firsthand the effort Hitoshi's opponents, Shouta's students—namely Izuku and Iida—had put into their training, and Hitoshi admittedly hadn't worked as hard in recent weeks, declining Shouta's numerous offers to assist him in physical training. From that perspective, he understands his students' frustration and disappointment. To be beat entirely by someone who seemingly puts no effort into his fights, when they've pushed themselves to their limits, would feel downright insulting.

But then Bakugou and Hitoshi walk out onto the field, and Shouta immediately realizes that this win won't be Hitoshi's.

He chuckles somewhat vindictively, and Hizashi looks at him, confused by his sudden change in demeanor. Shouta's almost surprised he hasn't noticed, but he only spends a single class period a day with 1-A. Shouta, though, has learned to recognize his students' habits in the last few weeks. With a class of problem children like his own, he's *needed* to learn these habits of theirs, so that he can catch and reform the ones that might be detrimental to their learning and overall wellbeing. So when Bakugou stands in the ring across from Hitoshi, Shouta immediately notices the abnormality.

Bakugou Katsuki is incredibly proud. He does not enjoy 'wasting time' on people or subjects that he views as beneath himself or that he just doesn't care about. As such, Shouta has several times caught him disconnecting his cochlear implant in the middle of class, subtly silencing the lectures for himself while still seeming to be paying attention to the untrained eye. Usually, Izuku replaces the magnetic attachment of the CI from behind him, reactivating it and forcing Bakugou to tune back in to the lessons.

Today, though, Bakugou stands across from Hitoshi with the external half of his implant completely absent, and there is nothing Hitoshi can do, short of becoming as loud as a jet engine, to be heard by his opponent. No matter what he says, Bakugou will not respond.

Hitoshi is clearly unaware of this. When Midnight begins the match with a dramatic wave, he smirks and calls something out, clearly expecting an enraged response. Bakugou, though, simply launches himself forward with a massive explosion and a yell loud enough for Shouta to hear in the announcer booth.

The thing about Hitoshi's Quirk is that its requirements of activation

are specific. It's not as simple as Hitoshi saying something and getting any sort of noise in response. The target has to truly understand Hitoshi's words and process them, and they must *actively* verbalize an actual reply to the comment.

Bakugou's violent shout of 'Die!' after Hitoshi's taunt does not meet these requirements.

Surprised by his inability to Brainwash him, Hitoshi futilely stumbles backwards, but it's not enough to dodge Bakugou's fiery palms. He takes a hit directly to the chest, and Shouta winces in sympathy, having been on the end of one of those explosions once himself during a sparring session—Bakugou had bragged about landing a blow on him for days afterwards. Shouta knows that the damage is restrained, less explosive than his maximum force, and is nothing that can't easily be healed by Recovery Girl, but the hit must sting regardless.

The hit forces Hitoshi to the edge of the ring, only barely within bounds, but Bakugou is chest to chest with him now, and he has no hope of recovery. Not against one of his most combatively component students. Bakugou spits something, unheard over Hizashi's frantic yelling over the stadium's speakers. Then, he kicks Hitoshi in the chest, sending him flying out of the ring. As Hitoshi lies sprawled across the ground, the crowd jeering, Bakugou turns and stalks away without a backwards glance. After these short weeks, Shouta knows him well enough to tell that he is unsatisfied despite the victory.

An hour later, after an awkward awards ceremony—in which a third place student was absent, second place kept muttering snide remarks under his breath, and first place glared into empty space until finally snapping at the student just below him—Shouta finally walks out of the stadium, Hitoshi by his side with a silver medal sitting proudly around his neck. He doesn't seem happy about it, though, and his feet are dragging with every step.

"Thought you'd be happier."

"Bakugou," Hitoshi growls as if that serves as sufficient explanation. Admittedly, it somewhat does.

"What did you say to each other on the podium? The mics didn't pick you up, and whatever he said to you shut you up pretty fast."

Hitoshi glowers and says nothing.

Outside of the stadium are a few stragglers enjoying the Festival's

booths and food stalls as it ends. Some of them, seeing the medal on Hitoshi's chest, congratulate him on his win, but Shouta sees just as many shake their heads, disappointed by the lack of excitement this Festival. Hitoshi ignores both the faint support and silent disapproval, remaining blank faced as they weave through the event.

At least until they pass a soba stall, where Bakugou, Izuku and, somewhat surprisingly, Todoroki sit with two adults—Bakugou's parents if their appearances were anything to go off of. At the sight of them, Hitoshi's subdued demeanor changes to a forced confidence as he straightens his shoulders and lifts his chin. Bakugou glowers haughtily, and Todoroki ducks his head to the side, but Izuku bites his lip contemplatively as he looks between Shouta and his son. Then, resolutely, he stands and approaches them.

Hitoshi tenses as Izuku draws nearer, but Shouta knows his student well enough to doubt he would do anything malicious. "Did you enjoy the rest of the festival, Problem Child?"

At the nickname, Hitoshi's eyes whip toward him. He knows as well as Shouta that he only verbally refers to kids by designated nicknames when he actually likes them. Although why he's surprised by Shouta's affection for Izuku, he isn't sure.

"I had a good time. Thank you, Sensei." Izuku seems to understand his real question—*are you okay now?*—and Shouta's shoulders relax at the confirmation. Turning to face Hitoshi, Izuku's small smile becomes a little dimmer, though it still appears genuine. "Shinsou, I just wanted to congratulate you on your success today."

"He won't lose to you again, Brain Freak!" Bakugou roars through a mouthful of Soba, ignoring the admonishing whack from his mother.

"Ignore him. He just wanted to fight me today and didn't get the chance," Izuku explains, glancing at his friend fondly.

"Congratulations, Shinsou. I hope to see you in 1-A with us soon, and uh, I hope we can prove you wrong... about what you said."

Hitoshi's eyes narrow. He doesn't reply.

Taking the hint, Izuku nods respectfully toward Shouta and rejoins his group. Bakugou's apparent father ruffles his hair familiarly, and Shouta can just overhear his "C'mon, Zuku, let's go back home" as he and Hitoshi walk away.

Shouta has questions, but he waits until they get home. As soon as

they're through the door, Hitoshi heading to the living room, he asks, "What did you say to them? During the fights."

He shrugs. "Just whatever I thought would get them talking."

"Hitoshi. What did you *say*?"

Glaring, Hitoshi collapses into the armchair and rips his medal from his neck to toss it spitefully onto the table. "What does it matter?"

"It matters, because I saw how they looked at you afterward, and I know you must've said *something* to make them look that way. We'll start with Shirakumo. What did you say to him? Word for word."

"Were you so confident at the USJ? If you're as strong as you're pretending to be now, why couldn't you save your teacher?"

Shouta blinks. "You... you used *the USJ incident* against him?" He had figured Hitoshi had said something cruel, but this... "What did you say to Todoroki?"

"Think you're gonna make daddy proud? Prove you'll be a hero just like him, when you couldn't stop the villains you've already met?"

"Iida?"

"Only a coward is faced with a group of villains and runs away. How can you be a hero like that?"

Stunned, particularly by the blankness of Hitoshi's tone, Shouta falls to sit on the couch, cradling his head in his hands. "Hitoshi... why would you..."

Hitoshi snorts. "What? The poor little heroes can't take some damage to their egos?"

"Hitoshi, you didn't just hurt their *pride*. I found Izuku having a *panic attack* after your match. Severe enough that he lost control of a Quirk he's never shown less than expert control over."

Briefly, Shouta sees Hitoshi wince. He's no stranger to panic attacks himself. Still, the empathy passes quickly, and Hitoshi turns furious eyes toward him. "Wait, so it's *Izuku*? First names? How special are these kids, huh?"

"That's not the point right now. The point is you weaponized a traumatic experience against children. You used it to manipulate

them, so you can use your Quirk on them. A hero wouldn't do something like that."

"*What* do you mean by that?"

"I mean," Shouta says, fighting to keep his voice relatively even, because he's furious, but this is still his son, and he's just misguided right now, "if this is going to be how you use your Quirk, by triggering your classmates, then I will personally make sure you are not transferred to 1-A."

At this, Hitoshi pales. "You wouldn't do that!"

"I would." Shouta means it too. "If it means protecting my students from being taunted by a traumatic experience they-

"How can you *defend* them like that!"

Stunned by the volume of the outburst, Shouta stops, and Hitoshi continues unbidden. "They were there. They let you... They didn't do anything! And you got hurt! You almost *died*, Dad." Hitoshi's voice trembles, becoming quieter. "You almost died. I was so, so scared, and I know Hizashi said it was a Code Red, not a Black, and I shouldn't have been worried... But you looked so hurt. It was so bad, and I thought you were gonna die. And those hero kids... they were *there*, and they just... they just let it happen."

Slowly, Shouta rises from the couch and pushes Hitoshi gently against one side of the armchair so he can squeeze into the opened space beside him. It's a tight fit, but Shouta's certain that the line of contact between their bodies is comforting right now. "Kid, I'm so sorry to have scared you like that. I'm here. I'm okay. I'll *be* okay, although I'm sure you rationally know that, right? It's the irrational part of your brain that's causing problems right now." Hesitantly, Hitoshi nods, and Shouta leans further against his side. "That's okay. It's *okay* to still feel overwhelmed by all of that. The USJ was bad, and it could've been worse, and that's scary

"But, Hitoshi, you cannot put any blame on those kids. They are just as much victims of that as I was, and they're *children*. They aren't heroes yet. They had no responsibility to defend a pro hero in that situation. Yet, despite that, they tried anyway."

"They... they what?"

"There are details of what happened that I didn't share with you,

because I thought they would only scare you and wouldn't do you any good. Now, though, I think you should know that those kids did not 'just let it happen,' and most of them did everything they could in that situation to keep me and everyone else safe. Specifically, if it weren't for Shirakumo's use of his Quirk during critical moments of that fight, there is a high possibility I would have sustained brain trauma or, at the very least, damage to my Quirk.

"Those kids are good kids. Don't blame them for the actions of villains that they tried to protect me from."

Hitoshi is silent for a few minutes. Shouta sits with him, continuing to lean his weight comfortably against his son's shoulder. Finally, he whispers, "I'm sorry. I just... I was scared. I didn't want to lose you, and I really thought I was going to."

"I know, and I understand. But those kids didn't deserve what you said to them. You need to apologize, when you're ready to, and you can't do it again. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you want me to sit with you for a while? Or would you rather be given space right now?"

"Space, please."

Nodding, Shouta stands from the arm chair. He drapes their softest blanket over Hitoshi's shoulders. "You made some mistakes today," he tells him, pulling the blanket tighter around him when Hitoshi wilts, "but I'm proud of you. I'm glad that we talked tonight, that you finally told me that this has been bothering you, and I hope that you confide in me in the future rather than continue to repress yourself. I love you."

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry." With one last squeeze to Hitoshi's shoulders, Shouta leaves him alone for the night.

Chapter End Notes

i didn't promise their first meeting would be a kind one :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Izuku does not accept Eraserhead's internship offer.

Instead, he puts down the Normal Hero: Manual's agency in Hosu.

Chapter Notes

guys!!! Sweetflower drew some absolutely stunning fanart of Izuku, please [give it a look](#) ! I am in love with how his hair looks!!!

if anyone draws anything for any of my fics please let me know i would love to see it!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Naturally, the only open seat in 1-A for Hitoshi is directly behind Izuku who, in turn, is directly behind Bakugou, so all of Shouta's Problem Children are lined up in a convenient row. It would be unwise to leave them all seated together, especially when Bakugou glares at Hitoshi each time he walks past, but he can't subtly change the seating chart, so he'll have to leave it for now. Izuku, at least, acts as a decent buffer between the two, and he's clearly well-practiced in wrangling Bakugou when he's in a mood.

Shouta had fully expected the class's lukewarm response to Hitoshi joining their class, and is pleased that for the most part, the reception has been positive, if a little hesitant. The only students Shouta needs to keep an eye on are Bakugou, obviously, Todoroki, who seems wary of Hitoshi but not necessarily malicious, and Iida.

Iida, whose brother is currently hospitalized, paralyzed, by a villain that calls himself a vigilante. He had brushed off all of his friends' concerns before class, saying he was fine, but Shouta could tell from the tension in his shoulders and the blank look in his eyes that he is decidedly not fine.

(Another friend lost. Not dead, maybe, but *lost*.)

Izuku is the only one of the students who appears to share Shouta's concerns, eyes glancing toward his friend periodically with thinly veiled concern.

(He's lost a brother himself.)

To the class at large, Shouta says, "You all performed well in the Sports Festival—some admittedly more than others." Bakugou's chest puffs pridefully, and Hitoshi smirks. "Your teachers aren't the only ones that took notice of this. Here are the numbers for internship offers. Usually, these are spread more evenly across the students, but apparently a few of you stood out over the rest."

BAKUGOU KATSUKI – 3556

TODOROKI SHOUTO – 3543

TOKOYAMI FUMIKAGE – 360

IIDA TENYA – 301

KAMINARI DENKI – 272

YAOYORAZU MOMO – 108

SHINSOU HITOSHI – 74

KIRISHIMA EIJIROU – 68

URARAKA OCHAKO – 20

SERO HANTA – 14

SHIRAKUMO IZUKU – 3

"I got offers," Izuku wonders to himself absentmindedly.

Bakugou scoffs. "Yeah, *three*. That's hardly any. Look how many I got!"

Mina raises a hand. "Why did Todoroki get so many? He didn't even make it to the semi-finals!"

"Nepotism," Todoroki answers matter-of-factly, only barely loud enough for Shouta to hear at the front of the classroom. Izuku clearly must have caught it too, if the disapproving glare cast in his direction as chastisement is any indication.

"Shouldn't Shinsou have gotten more?" Izuku asks, once Shouto's bashfully ducked his head down

Rolling his eyes, Hitoshi says, “Yeah, I *should’ve*, but I *didn’t*.”

Izuku frowns, clearly unhappy by this explanation but unwilling to pester Hitoshi more.

Calling the attention back to himself, Shouta speaks over their chatter. “Internships start next week. To prepare, we’ll be having a lesson on you public image as a hero, which I am personally unqualified to teach.”

The door slams open, and Shouta sighs exaggeratedly as Midnight struts into the room. “That’s where I come in! We’ll be choosing codenames today, so look sharp! Let’s get these whiteboards passed out, and we’ll get crackin’!” She snaps her whips in emphasis as Shouta retreats into his sleeping bag to escape the class’s enthusiasm.

Shouta does eventually poke his head out when his students begin announcing their names to the class, even if he doesn’t have the right to express his own opinions of them. ‘Eraserhead’ was chosen by Hizashi, after all, so Shouta’s obviously never been too invested in hero names.

Although, he feels that even he is allowed to cringe at Bakugou’s ‘King Explosion Murder,’ which is immediately followed up by Hitoshi’s ‘Insomnya,’ both of which are vocally condemned by their classmates. Todoroki and Iida each go with their given names, which is mildly concerning. Shouta will need to make sure that these aren’t signs of deeper issues that will likely need to be addressed in the future.

Izuku presents his hero name last. Immediately, Shouta can tell that he’ll need to pay close attention to this one by the foggy—*literally* foggy—look in the Problem Child’s eyes. Midnight, standing behind Izuku, glances at the white board clutched tightly in his grip and smiles a little forlornly.

“My brother... never got the chance to be the hero he should’ve been,” Izuku starts. Oh, Shouta understands what’s happening. “I never met him, but I know he would’ve been great. I’m not him—I won’t *ever* be him, and that’s alright—but I wanted to honor his lost opportunity with my own hero name. Even if Oboro will never be a hero, Loud Cloud still *can* be.” Izuku flips his board. “I am the Atmospheric Hero: Loud Cloud.”

(Oboro, years ago: “I’ll be a bold and confident hero always ready to help! I’m Loud Cloud!”)

The class cheers. Uncertainly, Izuku glances at Shouta.

Shouta nods, and Izuku finally smiles. A real smile.

“Okay everyone, those of you who have received internship offers need to grab your packets. Even if you have no offers, there are a list of agencies that have agreed to take any UA student. They aren’t picky. Make sure you have your agency chosen and your paperwork filled out by tomorrow. Bakugou, here’s yours.”

He passes out the packets to the kids with offers first, taking a quick moment to glance at Izuku’s list as he hands it over. He knows he sent an offer of his own, and ‘Eraserhead’ is subsequently written right in the middle. Below it is ‘Put Your Hands Up Agency,’ which is a little funny, since he and Hizashi definitely hadn’t coordinated this. The most perplexing name on his list, though, is the first one.

‘Endeavor Agency.’

Endeavor hadn’t even put in an offer for *Bakugou*, who won the Festival and has the type of flashy, powerful Quirk Shouta would’ve figured he would favor. Instead, he only put in an offer for his own son—‘Nepotism,’ Todoroki’s voice reminds him mentally—and Izuku, a kid with a non-offensive Quirk that really hadn’t made any kind of impact in the festival at all.

Izuku stares at the list in his hands as if it had personally offended him, twisting in his seat to beckon Todoroki over. Unable to mind his own business, Bakugou leans over the desk between himself and Izuku to read over the paper, and even Hitoshi is not-so-subtly listening to their conversation.

Shouta can’t really blame him, though, since he’s doing the same, but he can internally chastise him for not being as discrete.

“What the hell, Deku! You got an offer from Endeavor?”

“I guess?”

“Don’t accept it,” Todoroki suggests. “I don’t trust it. He’s probably mad about what you did at the festival, so he would make it a personal hell.”

“Deku, did you piss off *Endeavor*?! What the fuck did you do?!”

“Shhhhh, Kacchan, not so loud!”

“He put out his flames with his fog like a fire extinguisher,” Todoroki explains, and Shouta struggles not to choke. Hitoshi is less successful at this, apparently, and coughs into his hand to cover his subsequent wheeze of laughter.

“He was being so *mean* to you! I couldn’t just *ignore* it!”

Bakugou cackles. “Goddammit, Deku! Only *you* would receive an internship offer out of petty revenge.”

Izuku drops his head against the desk, and Todoroki offers a stiff pat to his shoulder. “Choose someone else. Sensei put in an offer for you. Maybe that would be good?”

At this, Izuku glances up at Shouta, who hurriedly moves his gaze away to pretend like he’s not paying attention. He has a feeling he’s been caught anyway. “Yeah. I’ll think about it.”

Izuku does not accept Eraserhead’s internship offer.

Instead, he puts down the Normal Hero: Manual’s agency in Hosu.

The evening after sending his students off to their respective internships, Hizashi barrels into Shouta’s apartment. In his hand is a bottle of alcohol.

“Hizashi, why are you here? *Some* of us have interns to train in the morning.”

Hitoshi, being the intern in question, waves from his seat on the couch.

“We both know neither of you will willingly get out of bed before noon, since you can make your own schedules! Can’t I hang out with my bestest buddy? I’m dealing with the heartbreak of rejection, ya know?” Hizashi tries the puppy eyes.

Unfortunately, Shouta gives in and leads Hizashi into the kitchen to pour their drinks. “Is this about Izuku not accepting your internship offer?”

He knows that’s not actually why Hizashi’s here, and Hizashi knows it too. He’s here because Shouta always feels inexplicably *wrong* after sending his students to internships and work studies.

(He feels like he’s personally sent his kids to their deaths.)

Hizashi points an accusing finger. “Hey! He didn’t accept yours either.”

Yeah, well, that does sting a bit. Especially because Shouta doesn’t see any logical reasoning for that decision. At least if Izuku had elected to go with Hizashi’s agency, Shouta would know that he’d be getting a decent amount of training there. But to choose Manual over either of his teachers seems odd and illogical.

“He said he didn’t want your ‘pity offers.’”

Both Hizashi and Shouta turn their heads to Hitoshi, casually sprawled in front of the TV in the living room. He further explains, “I overheard him talking to His Lordship, the Great Explosion Murder, about it during lunch, but they shut up once I sat down with them. Guess they still don’t trust me. It’s wack.”

“You sat with Izuku during lunch?” Hizashi asks.

“Izuku knows you’re my son. That’s most likely why he didn’t want to say anything around you if it could be seen as insulting to me.”

No longer paying attention to his documentary, Hitoshi sputters. “He knows?!”

“He visited me in the hospital after the USJ while you were asleep, and I didn’t lie when he asked who you were. There’s no reason to worry about it. If he hasn’t mentioned it to any of his friends yet, I doubt that he will. More importantly, why would he think they were ‘pity offers?’”

“Beats me. I didn’t hear anything else. What I wanna know is why you keep calling him Izuku like you know him personally—which I *know* you don’t because you would’ve made me meet him for a playdate or something way before this. You’re always saying I need more friends, whatever *that* means.”

“It means you’re an introverted recluse who will die alone at this rate,” Shouta jabs.

“Pot meet kettle.”

“Anyway!” Hizashi interrupts before Shouta can do something stupid like murder his own son in their living room, “we were buds with his brother back when we were at UA. We just call the little dude by his given name to distinguish between them, I think.”

Suddenly, Hitoshi pales. “So, *that’s* where I heard the name Loud Cloud before.” He glances at the wall behind the TV, where Shouta knows a blurry picture of himself, Hizashi, and Oboro is framed. It’s the *only* picture with Oboro in the apartment, his features indistinct enough that the sight of it doesn’t send a pain through Shouta’s chest.

“He would’ve been a great hero,” Hizashi says. Both he and Shouta take a drink. “And his own brother rejected my internship offer! The blasphemy!”

“So, it *was* a ‘pity offer,’ then?” Hitoshi says, ignoring Hizashi’s sputtered denial, “‘Cause it kinda sounds like you only wanted him because of his brother.”

“It wasn’t *pity* though!”

“Wasn’t it?” Hizashi turns to him with a look of utter betrayal, but Shouta continues, “I won’t deny that I largely offered Izuku the internship because I wanted to keep an eye on him.”

(Because I didn’t want what happened to Oboro to happen to him too, he doesn’t say. I’ve already failed one Shirakumo. I don’t want to fail another one.)

Hizashi understands, but he doesn’t wipe the pout from his face. “Still hurts that he chose Manual over us though, right? Like how random was that?!”

Shouta does agree, but “Iida Tenya chose Manual too. Maybe there’s something we don’t know that made him so appealing.”

“Something you don’t know?” Hitoshi lifts an eyebrow. “That’s suspicious.”

Again, Shouta agrees. He won’t let himself worry about it, though. He refuses to mother-hen over his students more than he already has. So,

he changes the topic. “How did the Problem Children respond to your apologies? Because you better have apologized like I told you to.”

Blushing, Hitoshi ducks his head so his face is hidden by the arm of the couch. “It was *fine*,” he tries, but reluctantly continues when Hizashi and Shouta stare at him in silent disapproval. “Iida just told me it was okay, and I didn’t want to bother him anymore since he’s got other things to worry about right now. Todoroki ignored me, I think? I’m not sure. I don’t think the dude can make an expression that isn’t Resting Bitch Face even if he tried, but at least he didn’t *attack* me like Bakugou did.”

Shouta freezes. “Bakugou attacked you? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Okay, ‘attack’ *might* be an exaggeration,” Hitoshi admits disgruntledly. “He just kinda glared and exploded a bit, but not really *at* me, and Shirakumo was there to control him, and Bakugou’s his bitch, so... it was fine.”

Hizashi chokes.

“And Shirakumo?” Shouta prompts, used to ignoring Hitoshi’s language.

Somehow, Hitoshi burrows further into the couch cushions as he mumbles something incoherently.

Hizashi holds a hand to his hear. “What was that, Mini-Shou? You know my ears ain’t how they used to be!”

“He was so nice!” Hitoshi whines, like Izuku’s kindness is a personal insult. “And understanding too? Like he literally told me he ‘understood’ and ‘wouldn’t hold it against me.’ He didn’t even give me a chance to actually apologize, and just said it was okay. Who even *does* that?”

“You mean, who doesn’t hold grudges for all eternity?” Hizashi clarifies helpfully.

Hitoshi points at him. “Exactly! Then he invited me to eat lunch with them, even though Bakugou and Todoroki *obviously* didn’t want me there!”

“He’s a good kid,” Shouta mentions offhandedly and Hitoshi lifts his head to gasp in betrayal. Shouta chooses not to point out the blush on

his face, but Hizashi might. “He’d be a good friend to you if you let him.”

(Shouta knows from experience that Shirakumos are good friends for the introverts.)

“**Yeah!**” Hizashi yells. Shouta’s not quite fast enough to cancel his Quirk. “Be his friend! The Three Dumbigos of Class A will rise again!”

“The three *what?*” Hitoshi asks, bewildered.

“Hizashi, do you realize that, in this scenario, you and Bakugou fulfil the same role? Of loud, irritating blonde?”

“**I take it all back!**”

Chugging what’s left of his drink, Shouta smirks and let the rowdiness Hitoshi’s cackling and Hizashi’s denial engulf him. For tonight, he can ignore the impending sense of doom knowing his kids are currently out of his reach, on their own. He can imagine that they’ll be fine for the week.

His kids were *not* fine for the week.

Shouta tries to tell the panic bubbling in his chest that it’s not his students’ fault that they were interned in the same city that the Nomu attacked, and no one could have predicted that. But then he learns that it wasn’t the Nomu that put his kids in the hospital, and he lets the panic return full force.

“I should apologize,” Manual tells him, quickly following on Shouta’s heels as he bustles through the hospital. “Shirakumo warned me that he was worried for Iida’s mental state, and I promised to keep an eye on him, but well... The Nomu showed up, and I lost track of them for a while.”

“And that’s when they decided to engage a villain, that has killed other heroes, on their own?” Shouta clarifies.

“Yes, apparently.”

Finally reaching his idiot students’ room, Shouta waves Manual off.

“I’ll take it from here. I’m sure you’ve already had your turn reprimanding them, so leave them to me.”

Too good-natured for his own good, Manual nods and turns back down the hallway. “You got it. Take it easy on ‘em though, eh? They recognize their mistakes.”

No, Shouta will not take it easy on them. The world won’t do them that service, so neither will he.

When Shouta opens the door, he expects panic, anger, fear to rise within him at the sight of his students in their hospital beds, whatever condition they may be in. He is not prepared for the relief.

(His students are wounded. They are not dead.)

All three of them—Iida, Todoroki, Izuku—are awake and lucid enough to pale at the sight of Shouta standing furiously in the doorway. They have the awareness to feel guilty then. Good.

“S-sensei!” Izuku stutters, shrinking under Shouta’s glower. “What are you doing here?”

“You thought your homeroom teacher wouldn’t be notified of any incidents that occurred during your internships? Particularly when they are caused by your own reckless behavior?” No immediate answer comes. “How else would the three of you receive proper punishment? The police may have been lenient, but I will not be the same way.”

Iida straightens to sit tall in his hospital bed. “Aizawa-sensei, please! I humbly ask that you recognize the fault as my own! Todoroki and Shirakumo were involved due to my own foolish actions! If anyone is to be punished, please let it be only me. I take full responsibility.”

Narrowing his eyes, Shouta asks, “Even if that results in your expulsion?”

Iida turns red, but before he can say anything, Izuku stumbles out of his bed, grabs Shouta by the wrist, and tugs him into the hallway. “Sensei! I need to talk to you about something very important. It’s very urgent!”

Shouta, mostly confused and a little curious, allows this to happen. “Should you be out of bed, Problem Child?”

Shouta knows he shouldn't be. He'd gotten a run down from the nurses on his students' condition. Todoroki had gotten out of the ordeal relatively unscathed, with only nicks and bruises. Iida's shoulder had been injured, but his arm was still functional with slight loss of dexterity in his fingers. Izuku, on the other hand, had taken the brunt of the injuries. Quirk exhaustion from the fight and the patrol leading up to it. A laceration from Stain's blade crossing his chest from his left shoulder to his belly button. Then, deep puncture marks in his back from the Nomu that had attempted to carry Izuku away in its claws.

Leaning against the wall for support, Izuku smiles sheepishly. "Probably not! But the sooner you listen to me, the sooner I can put the IV back in."

This damn kid.

"Get to it, then."

Izuku's confidence deflates, like he never expected to get this far. "Uh, please don't expel Iida?"

"That's all you got?"

"No, I just..." He trails off, collecting himself. "He made a mistake. He knows that now. He realized that his actions for revenge would've never actually solved anything and only put more people in danger. The lesson has been learned, so there's no reason to punish him further."

"You think I should allow someone that lets emotions dictate their actions and cloud their judgement, become a hero?"

"But that's what I'm saying!" Izuku argues, standing straighter. He cowers only slightly at Shouta's blank expression, but quiets his voice into something more rational. "You're right that Iida let his anger and need for revenge guide his decisions. But Sensei... he's just a kid. His brother that he looked up to was nearly killed, paralyzed for life. Of course he'd be emotional about something like that, right? I really don't think he'd do it again!"

"His doing it once is enough."

"Wouldn't you have done the same, if the person who killed Oboro were still out there?"

Shouta stills, and Izuku claps his hands over his mouth, as if he hadn't meant to say that.

"Excuse me?"

"I-I don't mean you would do that *now!*" Izuku waves his hands in denial, but the motion throws him off balance so he has to lean back against the wall. "Well, maybe you would, but... I'm just saying that you *care!* I don't think you could be a hero if you didn't. That's why you're s-so hard on us, because you don't want to see us hurt."

(Shouta doesn't want to see them *dead*.)

"So, you have to understand why Iida did that, and why Todoroki and I couldn't just leave him alone in that alley. I think... I think you would've done the same, maybe? If you were us?"

Would he have? Shouta doesn't *know*. In high school, he was too hesitant, cowardly, too unsure of his own worth as a hero. He might not have had the courage to help his friends in a situation like that, with the odds stacked so high against them.

But Hizashi would've. Oboro would've. And they were always better than Shouta could ever hope to be.

To Izuku, Shouta says, "Passion is no excuse to ignore logic."

"With all due respect, Sensei, isn't that something you learn from experience? Iida's had that experience now."

Glaring, Shouta throws open the door to the hospital room, ignoring Todoroki leaning against the closest wall obviously eavesdropping. "I've listened to what you have to say. Back in your bed, Problem Child," he demands. Knowing that the discussion was over, Izuku shuffles into the room.

Once he and Todoroki are resettled, Shouta turns to Iida. "If you ever do something so illogical again, I will expel you without hesitation. Consider yourself lucky this time. I will see all three of you in class next Monday, and your injuries will not exempt you from training, so recover well. Do *not* discuss this experience with any of your classmates. I don't want them getting any ideas." Iida gapes in shock, and Shouta turns to leave, glancing at Izuku over his shoulder. "I will send a nurse in to replace your IV."

He ignores the chorus of "Thank you, Sensei!" as the door closes

behind him.

Honestly, he should've expelled all three of them. It would've been less of a headache that way. But deep down, though he doesn't want to admit it, he knows Izuku is right. Good heroes *care*, and his students are just kids who haven't had the time (or experienced enough tragedy) to learn how to handle their emotions logically.

(For Shouta, it had always been the opposite. Always a logical thinker, it was Oboro that taught him how to *care* enough to be a hero.)

He needs to talk to Nezu. If his students insist on getting into trouble like this, the dorms might need to be implemented at UA sooner than planned, if only so Shouta can keep an eye on them. Especially if the League planned the Nomu attack like Shouta suspects, targeting his students for who knows what reason...

As Shouta passes the reception area of the hospital, he pauses at the sight of familiar spiky blonde hair. It takes a second for him to realize that he isn't looking at Bakugou. Or at least not Bakugou Katsuki.

The woman from the sports festival—Bakugou Mitsuki, he concludes—is standing across the desk from the receptionist, laughing boisterously. “Wow! You people sure take security seriously around here, huh?”

The receptionist smiles diplomatically and passes a plastic card to Ms. Bakugou. “Sorry about the hassle. Only family members are allowed to visit patients in the hero ward, for security reasons, and we're especially careful when it comes to minors. We just needed to verify that your Shirakumo's legal guardian, but it looks like everything checks out.”

“Hey, no skin off my back! I'd rather know my kid is being taken care of, even if I gotta do the extra paperwork.” Her eyes, red like her son's, catch Shouta from where he stands in the ward's entryway, and she grins, diverting her attention from the receptionist. “Hey! You're the brats' teacher, right? I never did get the chance to thank ya for looking out for those kids. I'd say that I hope they haven't been too much trouble but well,” she gestures at the hospital waiting room, “those boys are definitely a handful, though I'm sure you're very aware of this by now.”

The way she speaks of Izuku and Katsuki, all fond exasperation, Shouta can tell that she genuinely cares for the both of them. Even if Izuku isn't hers by blood, he's still *hers*.

(What happened to Inko?)

“Please tell your children to refrain from anymore incidents,” Shouta requests of Ms. Bakugou, and she cackles. “I’d rather not see them in a hospital room until *at least* next year, if possible.”

“Ha! I can do my best, but those boys will likely be getting into trouble no matter what we do.” Her sharp smile softens suddenly as she pauses in front of Shouta, who is still partially blocking the doors leading further into the hospital. “Honestly, thanks for keepin’ on eye on my kids. They’re good boys, even if their passion makes ‘em a little reckless sometimes. You’re good for ‘em, I can tell. Katsuki’s finally got something to focus all his determination into productively, and Izuku... well, that boy’s had a lot of important people shoot him down, but from how he talks about you, I know there’s someone else out there supportin’ him now. Thanks for that.”

“They better be worth the effort,” Shouta says, but he knows they will be.

Ms. Bakugou laughs. “I’ll tell ‘em you said that! I’d better go check on Izuku before he finds some way to start trouble from a hospital bed. Thanks for all your hard work, Aizawa!” She’s still chuckling as she shoves past him and disappears down the hallway.

He lets her go, even if the conversation left him with more questions unanswered about the Shirakumo family.

(What happened to Inko?)

For now, he has other things to worry about. He needs to speak with Nezu.

As usual, UA is empty when he arrives that evening. Even after hours, students are usually milling about in the labs and training rooms, but with internships underway, the halls are desolate.

Which is why he logically assumes that Nezu’s office will be empty as well.

Unfortunately, he is incorrect.

Of all possible people, *Yagi* is sat across from Nezu, sharing a cup of tea. It's oolong, so whatever they had been discussing, it must have been important. Shouta's clearly interrupting, but he's certain that Nezu would've seen him coming long before he burst into his office, with all the cameras around the school. If his presence were unwanted, Shouta would not have been allowed in, he's sure.

Confirming his suspicions, Nezu gestures to the free arm chair next to *Yagi*. "Ah, Aizawa, welcome. We were just discussing something, but your opinion would actually be quite valued on the matter, so please do sit."

Yagi shifts uncomfortably, so Shouta gladly takes a seat, if only to watch the great All Might squirm. "Ah, I'm not sure if—"

"*Yagi*, I do think it's vital to hear Aizawa's own thoughts on this, especially considering that it concerns one of his students. Although," Nezu turns to Shouta, gesturing with the paw not holding his tea, "I'm sure you're here for your own reasons? We can start with those, if you wish."

"I want the dorms to be implemented as soon as possible," Shouta states plainly.

Nezu hums. "I assume this has to do with the incident in Hosu?"

"It does. I don't think it was a coincidence that the Nomu were there, especially when one targeted Shirakumo and attempted to carry him away somewhere. I can only assume the League wanted something to do with my students, or even with Shirakumo specifically."

Clearing his throat, *Yagi* asks, "Is there any reason that they would be interested in Shirakumo?"

"His interference during the USJ attack might have brought their attention to him, but otherwise I don't know. Which is why, for now, it's more logical to assume that the League is targeting the students in general, likely due to their association with All Might."

"I do agree with you, Aizawa," Nezu says. "To best ensure the students' safety, it would be rational to house them here on campus, where there are pro heroes to defend them. Because of this, I have already requested that Cementoss work overtime on completing the dormitory buildings, and he should be finished before the end of the semester. I suggest we use these next few weeks to explain the situation to the students and deal with any inevitable backlash from

the parents at our decision. I can imagine that many of them will not be happy about this, but it is the best way to protect the students, so it should not be too much of an issue. Is that amenable to you, Aizawa?”

“They’d be able to move in after the break?” he confirms.

“Correct! And during the break, the students should all be attending the training camp, so there should be no security risks there.”

“Good. I’ll inform my class when they return from internships.”

Nezu nods, satisfied, and pours another cup of tea. Shouta hadn’t requested one, but he accepts nonetheless. “Now that that’s out of the way... Yagi, would you like to explain your proposition to Shouta? I really do think he should have some input.”

Hesitantly, Yagi scratches the back of his neck. “Nezu, are you positive that-”

“Spit it out, Yagi. Now that I know there’s something going on, I won’t leave it alone anyway.”

Yagi sighs. “Please, listen to everything I have to say before you tell me it’s a bad idea,” he begins, and Shouta straightens in his seat, setting the tea cup on the desk in front of him. He has a feeling that he won’t want anything fragile in his hands for this. “There’s a lot to explain, and a lot of it won’t make sense at first, so just... hear me out.”

Ignoring the rapid heartbeat behind his ribs, Shouta waves him on impatiently.

“I would like to ask Young Shirakumo to inherit my Quirk.”

Chapter End Notes

originally, i intended for izuku's hero name to be BASED off of loud cloud's, but there's literally nothing else good that rhymes with cloud except for 'Proud' and Proud Cloud isn't bad necessarily, but I think loud cloud just flows better, so that's what i went with, sorry lol

also, next chapter is short and pretty dialogue heavy, so i'll be posting it on friday! with a regular length chapter next monday,

as usual, I just didn't want yall waiting a week for a 2k word chapter, cause that would be disappointing. that being said, we've clearly reached the point where we're beginning to stray from canon a bit more, and chapters will start to be longer and heavier soon!

unfortunately, that means more writing for me, so don't be surprised if i need to take a random week break at some point in the near future, just so i can get ahead of schedule with the chapters again. i'm very busy with work and college, but i'll do my best to keep updates consistent and will let you know if schedules change!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

When Izuku stumbles into class two minutes before the first bell, a dazed and conflicted expression on his face, his suspicions are only confirmed.

All Might had already asked him.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, like i mentioned before, i'm posting this chap off-schedule because it's short and very dialogue dense. like EXTREMELY dialogue dense. like all 3.5 words are two whole conversations lol

i felt like it wouldve been a disappointing chapter by itself (even though its important to flesh some things out), so i'm posting it between two normally scheduled chapters. this way you dont have to wait for such a disappointing chapter, then wait another week to get back to the good stuff.

that being said, see y'all again next monday!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shouta had fully intended to be present for All Might's conversation with Izuku. Even if All Might tried to be sneaky about it, he'd been prepared to *eavesdrop* on it at the very least. Unfortunately, All Might must have been aware of Shouta's one weakness: under no possible circumstances would he willingly arrive to the school more than ten minutes early on a Monday.

As soon as he walks into the classroom, Hitoshi on his heels, and spies Bakugou sitting at his desk with no Izuku in sight, Shouta knows that he's lost. When Izuku stumbles into class two minutes before the first bell, a dazed and conflicted expression on his face, his suspicions are only confirmed.

All Might had already asked him.

Shouta throws out a hand, stopping Izuku before he can make it to his desk. "If you need to talk, Problem Child, I'm here."

Frowning and still a little glassy eyed, Izuku nods. When he sits in his desk, Bakugou spins on him, hissing something under his breath, but Izuku just shakes his head and waves him away. “Later, Kacchan. I’ll tell you later.”

Throughout the lesson, Shouta can tell that Izuku isn’t paying attention, but he really can’t be blamed for that. After all, the child had just been asked if he would bear the burden of accepting one of the strongest Quirks in existence, and by extension, accept the responsibility of becoming one of the strongest heroes. Shouta can forgive him for zoning out halfway through his lessons.

During lunch, Izuku comes to his desk. “Do you... do you *know*?”

“If this is about All Might, then yes, I do know. And I know what he has offered you. You can speak to me freely without breaking anyone’s trust.”

Nodding absentmindedly, Izuku glances around the classroom, eyes pausing on each of his classmates. “Can we talk after class, Sensei?”

Shouta is relieved. He’s relieved that the Problem Child is asking for advice. He’s relieved that he trusts Shouta enough to come to him about this. And he’s relieved that he seemingly hasn’t rushed anything and already accepted All Might’s offer. “Of course. We can discuss this in one of the school’s private rooms, if that would put you more at ease.”

“Yes, please. I... I just don’t know-”

“We’ll talk about it after class,” Shouta reminds him. “Don’t worry yourself about it now.”

Izuku inhales deeply and lets the tension drain from his shoulders. “Yes, sensei.” He returns to his circle of friends, Bakugou and Todoroki whispering their questions to him curiously, while Hitoshi stares at Shouta over Izuku’s head. Shouta shakes his head at the questioning gaze. This isn’t his to share.

By the end of the day, Izuku’s anxiety has visibly returned as he picks at the cuticles of his fingernails. Bakugou tries to drag him out the door, as is their usual routine, but Izuku digs his heels into the floor, shaking his head. “Sorry, Kacchan. I need to talk to Sensei about something. Go home without me.”

Bakugou narrows his eyes. “Is this about whatever the fuck All Might

had to talk to you about this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“What, is it some kind of secret?” When Izuku doesn’t respond, Bakugou snarls and pops a small explosion toward the ground. “I thought we didn’t keep secrets, nerd.”

“We don’t,” Izuku agrees easily. He makes eye contact with Shouta as he says, “I’ll tell you everything later tonight, I promise. I just need to figure some things out on my own first.”

It’s not a question. He isn’t asking for permission to tell Bakugou what exactly All Might is offering to him. It’s a promise that he will.

Shouta nods anyway.

“Fine, Deku,” Bakugou spits, turning to stalk out of the classroom. “I’ll see you at home.”

Now, it’s just Shouta, Izuku, and Hitoshi who stands awkwardly beside his own desk. “You can wait for me here or you can walk home without me,” Shouta tells him. “I just need to discuss some things with the Problem Child.”

Hitoshi shuffles on his feet, rubbing the back of his neck. “Uh, I was hoping to talk to Shirakumo? Really fast, I promise.”

Izuku takes a step closer to Shouta, smiling shakily. “Sorry, Shinsou, can we talk tomorrow? I don’t want to keep Sensei waiting...”

“It’s fine,” Shouta says, falling for Hitoshi’s pleading look way too easily. He isn’t quite sure what his son wants, but he’ll let it play out, even if it means Izuku sends him a panicked glance of betrayal.

“See, he doesn’t mind!” Shinsou gestures for Shouta to go outside. He wants to talk to Izuku in private, then. Interesting. Shouta obliges but lurks just outside the doorway to listen in discretely.

“Listen, Shirakumo, I, uh... are you okay?”

“Am I... Am I okay?”

“My dad told me what happened with the Hero Killer? He said you were injured, and I know you’re not supposed to talk about it, but I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

A pause. Izuku is clearly confused. "I'm fine? I appreciate you asking."

"Okay, okay good... I'm glad you're okay." Another pause, this one more awkward, like Hitoshi is gearing himself up to say something. "I, uh, I know I already apologized for."

"Oh, Shinsou, I promise I'm not mad! It's okay! Really."

"No, I don't think it is," Hitoshi snaps. From behind the door, Shouta mentally urges his son to slow down, take a breath. Don't be so easily frustrated. "Sorry, sorry, I shouldn't have snapped like that."

"It's fine."

"But it's *not*." Hitoshi's tone is quieter now, more plaintive than frustrated, like he's begging Izuku to understand. "You're really kind, Shirakumo. I envy that about you, a little bit, just how forgiving and nice you are. But you should be a little mad at me. I said those things... I said very cruel things to you, and I wanted them to hurt you when I said them. I don't now, obviously, but that doesn't matter. It really wasn't cool of me. And I wanted to make sure that you *know* that it wasn't cool of me."

"Of course I know that," Izuku murmurs, gently. Shouta is so impressed by this boy's patience, able to listen to Hitoshi's apology even when he already has so much on his own shoulders. "What you said... it really did hurt me. Like a lot. But it hurt me because those were things I already thought about myself. I thought I was weak, and not good enough to be a hero, especially if I wasn't good enough to save your dad. You didn't say anything that I didn't already think was true."

"That doesn't mean it was *okay*."

"You're right, it doesn't. But it also wasn't the worst thing someone's said about me, or even *to* me. And it's also not the worst thing I've ever forgiven. What I was trying to say is, I shouldn't be bothered by others' opinion of me, right? That's what I try to tell myself, at least. So when someone says something hurtful, I should do my best to just... let it go.

"And I also know that people say hurtful things when they're hurting. I've been on the other end of it before, too. Your dad almost died, Shinsou, and you wanted someone to blame. Me and the others, we were just that someone. I don't think it was okay to try to hurt us like that, but I understand why you did it, and I forgive you for it. I

promise.”

“God, you’re so *nice*,” Hitoshi groans. “Why can’t you be a little mean about it? I’d totally deserve it.”

Izuku chuckles weakly. “Kacchan will be mean enough for me. He and Todoroki will be harder to earn the forgiveness of, so focus on them instead. Also, uh, if you really want to make it up to me? Please don’t mention Todoroki’s father to him again. I can’t really say why... but please don’t.”

“I can do that,” Hitoshi agrees quickly, obviously eager to make up for his mistake in any way possible. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think that what I said was true. Definitely not anymore, anyway. You’re really strong and really brave.”

“Oh! Uh, thanks, Shinsou. I’ll remember that. And I do appreciate the second apology, even if it wasn’t necessary.”

“We’re cool then?”

“Of course we are! Please, don’t worry about it!”

“Cool. Can you let my dad know that I’ll just wait for him here? Assuming he hasn’t been listening to this whole conversation.”

Shouta steps away from the door, leaning against the wall opposite the classroom. They have no evidence that he’s been eavesdropping. Yet, when Izuku steps out from the classroom, he smiles shakily, and Shouta knows that he’s at least suspicious. Izuku doesn’t say anything about it, following behind Shouta as he leads him to the private conference room, but he also doesn’t tell Shouta that Shinsou will wait for him either, so he must assume that Shouta was listening. A correct assumption, but still disappointing to be so well-known by his son and student.

“C’mon, Shirakumo,” Shouta urges, swinging open the door to a private room and gesturing to one of the empty chairs. “Let’s talk.”

“You... you really don’t have to call me that, if you don’t want to.”

Confused, Shouta turns to him. “Call you what? Your name?”

“I think, well, I can tell it kind of hurts you? To call me that? I mean, I figured that’s why you called me Problem Child so often. And your face kind of scrunches up whenever you call me by my last name, so

it's probably because I remind you of Oboro, which is understandable. I don't mind if you don't call me by name, Sensei."

Has Shouta been doing that? This whole time? He knows that the name is hard to say out loud—he can taste it like acid on his tongue—and he can't bring himself to even think the name mentally, but he never thought that it was obvious enough for Izuku to pick up on. "I'm sorry. I know you said that you don't like being compared to your brother."

Izuku shakes his head. "No, no, it's okay, really! I'm used to reminding people of Oboro anyway, so it's not a big deal. Also, when you do it, I don't think it's because I really remind you of him? It's more the name itself that you associate with him, so it's really okay."

"Well, I can't just call you 'Problem Child' forever."

"I don't really mind it, honestly! I just don't... I don't want you to associate me with any negative feelings, Sensei, and if it hurts you every time you call me by name then..."

Shouta hums. He doesn't think he'll ever be able to fully ignore the familial connection between Izuku and Oboro. They're just too alike in ways that matter. But even still, he can recognize that Izuku is his own person. "Shirakumo," he says, forcing the name to roll from his tongue without the familiar prick of poison it usually brings, "I refuse to allow the... the death of your brother to tarnish my image of you. I'm much too stubborn to let something like unrelated emotions affect my relationship with my students, after all, even when that emotion is the grief of a loved one."

(Had he *loved* Oboro? Best not to think about that right now.)

"I already told you that your brother was very important to me, and that you remind me of him, but I also told you that you are your own person, and I have formed an opinion of you that is unbiased by your relationship and association to Oboro. Do you trust me in that, Shirakumo?"

Izuku smiles.

(It is just as stunning as Oboro's smile, but...)

It's *Izuku's* smile.

Shouta lets the warmth of that grin wash over him as Izuku nods. "I

trust you, Sensei. Thank you.”

(How many people had never extended Izuku this same courtesy? How many people looked at him and only saw the ghost of his brother? How many people refused to see the bright light of the boy beneath?)

“Good. Now, we aren’t here to discuss something as annoying as emotions, are we?”

Izuku’s demeanor changes, the smile dimming and his shoulders curling inward. “No, we’re not. All Might told you about...” He waves his hands.

“About One for All, yes. And how he wants you to inherit it.”

“I don’t know what to do! On the one hand, this is a huge honor! I can’t believe All Might would choose me as his successor to inherit a Quirk as amazing as his! It’s *amazing*! But how can I possibly live up to that kind of expectation?! I’m nobody! Fog is nothing like One for All. Why would he think I could possibly handle that kind of-”

“Shirakumo, you’re rambling. Take a breath while I dissuade some of your doubts.” Izuku inhales sharply, and Shouta uses the lull as a chance to continue. “Firstly, your implication that you being a ‘nobody,’ as you put it, is a flaw in your capability to wield One for All, is illogical. Consider the fact that you are a ‘nobody’ solely because you are a student that is still learning to become a hero. By this reasoning, anybody that All Might would have chosen to be a successor would’ve been a ‘nobody,’ since young students have the best potential to learn how to handle a new Quirk and that’s part of the criteria he is looking for. Not only that, but unlike most other students, you have already proven yourself capable of handling yourself adequately when faced in a high-stakes situation, like the USJ attack.

“Next is your concern that Fog will not be compatible with One for All. Admittedly, I have concerns about this as well, but I believe it can actually prove to be beneficial with the right training. As you use it now, Fog is defensively oriented, and you use it primarily to shield yourself and others from attacks or to increase your own maneuverability, which is extremely logical for your fighting style and your current capabilities. However, it does not have much offensive ability, which you have to overcome with your own physical strength. You’ve done an admirable job conditioning your body, but it’s nothing

compared to the offensive power that One for All would provide. With the right training, the combination of Fog and One for All could serve to round out your abilities well. Anything else to address?”

Meekly, Izuku sinks lower into his seat. “What if I’m just not good enough?”

“Kid, you have too many people that believe in you for that to be true.”

“Do you... do *you* think I’m good enough, Sensei?”

“Absolutely,” Shouta tells him honestly.

When All Might had first proposed this to Shouta, back in Nezu’s office last week, Shouta had initially been firmly opposed. Who is All Might to say that Izuku isn’t good enough as he is? That he needs a physical Quirk like One for All when he’s already proven himself to be fully capable of becoming a hero with Fog and his creative mind?

But when Shouta allowed All Might to explain, he realized that All Might wanted to give Izuku One for All *because* he’s proven himself so capable already.

‘I know that boy has the heart to be a hero,’ All Might had said. ‘That’s why I can trust him with a Quirk like this.’

And All Might is right. Izuku *would* be a great hero, with or without the strength of One for All, and that’s why he deserves to have it.

“However, just because I think you *could* do it does not mean I think you should. The only person that can make a decision on that is *you*. From what All Might told me, One for All has the potential be a burden as much as it can be a gift. The Quirk itself is dangerous and has the potential to *hurt* you if not properly controlled. It would require a serious, rigorous training regime for you to even learn to handle it correctly, since it’s so different from your current Quirk. During this, you wouldn’t be exempt from your current studies—you wouldn’t be getting any special treatment, Problem Child—and would be training Fog on top of it as well, and that would put you under a lot of stress. It won’t be easy.”

Izuku smiles, albeit a little shakily. “That’s what you’re for, right, Sensei? To help me.”

Sighing, Shouta can’t quite stop the upturn of his lips. “Yes, Problem

Child, that's what I'm here for. Doesn't mean I'll make it easy for you though." Izuku's smile rightfully dims a bit.

"Additionally, a Quirk with a history like that.. even if All Might has defeated All for- wait, he told you about All for One, right?" Izuku nodded. "Okay, good, he did something right for once, then. The point is, there are likely still others that he left behind. A villain like that does *not* disappear without any lasting impression, and this Quirk would paint a large target on your back.

"This decision is yours, and yours alone," Shouta says when Izuku chews on his lip quietly, thinking. "You have the potential to be a great hero. You wouldn't be in my class if I believed otherwise. You don't *need* this Quirk to succeed. If you decide to take All Might's Quirk, it would only be another tool for you to use in your career. A very strong, versatile tool, sure, but you are more than capable without it."

"It's not the Quirk that makes the hero," Izuku mutters distantly. "It's how you use it."

Shouta nods, fighting the proud smile slipping onto his face. He thinks it sneaks into his expression anyway. "My advice is that you think about what kind of hero you want to be, and whether this new tool would benefit you in that regard. Simple as that."

("Someone who can make others feel safe just by their demeanor alone," Izuku had said, back in that hospital room, "that's the kind of hero I want to be.")

"I told All Might that I needed to think about it, when he asked earlier."

"A logical response. Good job, Problem Child."

"He said I have until after the break to decide..."

"I'd recommend using all of that time, if you need it. This is a big decision that will impact your career as a hero, so don't rush yourself unnecessarily if he said you have the time to think it over."

"Sensei... what do you think I should do?"

(Don't take it. It'll kill you.)

"Izuku, I meant it when I said that this is *your* decision. It's yours

alone. I am glad that you've trusted me enough to seek out my advice, and I hope you ask for others' opinions too, but ultimately you need to make the decision that is best for you. Don't worry about All Might's situation if you say no. He'll be fine. Don't worry about disappointing me, or others, or even society, with your answer. Worry only about yourself."

Quietly, Izuku thanks him as he slips out the door. Shouta really hopes he heeds his advice.

(Just this once, let Shirakumo worry about himself more than others.)

Chapter End Notes

okay friends, we're setting things up for future chapters here

next up: final exams start to come into play!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“Hello, Aizawa. I do think it’s time to discuss the format of your students’ practical exams, so please sit. Tea?”

Chapter Notes

btw... y'all... i would sell my soul if someone drew fanart of izuku's hero costume, which i finally ACTUALLY describe this chapter... i just love jackets. let the boy wear a jacket!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hello, Aizawa. I do think it’s time to discuss the format of your students’ practical exams, so please sit. Tea?”

“Where’s Vlad?”

“I wanted your opinion before I brought anything to him. You see, I have some... changes to our usual exam that I would like to propose.”

“Listen up, brats. I have an important announcement.” Shouta waits a total of three seconds for his students to settle. They still need some work, but they’re improving. “The UA faculty has decided to implement a dormitory system. As of next semester, it will be mandatory for all students to live on campus, or else your enrollment at this school will be terminated.”

“Dorms?!” Kaminari shrieks gleefully.

Ashido cheers, raising her hands skyward. “We can all hang out all the time! It’ll be totally fun.”

“This decision was not made with your enjoyment in mind,” Shouta growls, silencing the students’ excited murmurs with a glare. “It is not intended to be ‘fun.’ We are doing this solely for your security and protection. Somehow, the students this year have been illogically troublesome”—he sweeps a tired gaze across the room to convey that

his class is the troublesome one. He hopes the Hero Killer kids in particular feel the full weight of his disappointment—“so the dorms were proposed as a method of keeping an eye on you children. I will reiterate that living in the dorms will be a requirement of your continued enrollment. I’ll be speaking with each of your parents to make sure this is not a problem. Any questions?”

“Will there be a curfew?”

“Will the girls share a bathroom with the boys?!”

“Do we need chaperones to leave campus?”

“How big are the rooms?”

“Can we have sleepovers?!”

Shouta shouldn’t have asked.

“What exactly are you proposing, Nezu?”

“Due to the unprecedented attacks on your students, I think it would be beneficial to review our curriculum for the year. If villains plan to target our students, we should really do our best to prepare them for anything they might face.”

“Hey, Shirakumo.”

Curiously, Shouta listens as he shuffles papers on his desk, watching from the corner of his eye as Hitoshi cuts Izuku off before he can follow Bakugou out the door for the day.

Izuku stumbles before he can run into Hitoshi. “Oh. Hi, Shinsou. Did you need something?”

“Yeah, well, I-”

“Oi, Deku! What’s the hold up?!”

“Just a minute, Kacchan! Wait for me outside!” With Izuku briefly distracted, Hitoshi catches a desperate glance toward Shouta. He’s been nervous about this all week, never having the chance to make many friends in the foster homes he grew up in, and his current social ineptitude making it difficult for him to make friends now. Izuku’s kind patience and endless forgiveness for social blunders is what draws Hitoshi to him now, hopeful to finally have a friend.

(Shouta was drawn to Oboro for the same reasons.)

Shouta tries his best to convey encouragement with a firm nod.

“Sorry, Shinsou, I don’t have much time. Is something wrong?”

“No! No, uh, nothing’s wrong. I just overheard you talking to Bakugou earlier about not understanding English very well? And you’ll really need to figure that out if you want to do well on the final exam...”

When Hitoshi trails off, Izuku shakes his head. “Are you... Are you making fun of me? Because I’m really doing my best, even if it’s not great.”

“No, not making fun of you!” Hitoshi yells, a little too loudly. Shouta flinches in second-hand embarrassment as his son mutters, “Why am I so bad at this, oh my god...”

Shouta wants to intervene, but he promised to let Hitoshi figure this out for himself. Luckily, Izuku waits patiently, even if he still appears confused by the interaction.

Finally, Hitoshi collects himself. “I was gonna offer to help, if you thought you needed it? I’ve basically had Hizashi, uh, I mean Present Mic, as a second dad these last few years, and I’m pretty fluent in English now because of it. If you want, I can tutor you?”

“Oh! You really don’t have to do that! I already asked Kacchan, and even if he says he won’t help me, I know he will if I bother him about it enough, so there’s really no need to worry about me.”

Pathetically, Hitoshi looks back to Shouta again, already prepared to give up when this is the farthest he’s gotten in a positive social interaction in years, probably. Shouta sighs and gestures for him to keep going.

Hitoshi, blessedly, listens. “The thing is, I want to. Help that is. You can come over sometime this week? Maybe tomorrow if you’re free? Maybe we can watch a movie after too, and uh, just hang out?”

Izuku blinks, and Hitoshi sweats as he processes the question. Finally, he grins. “Oh! Okay, yeah, if you’re sure you want to help me, then that’d be great! Thank you!”

Now Hitoshi looks surprised, and he nods dumbly. “Cool, cool. Tomorrow, after school?”

“That works for me! I gotta go, but I’ll see you tomorrow! Bye, Shinsou!”

Dazed by the enthusiasm, Shinsou waves weakly, long after Izuku has already disappeared through the door. Shouta pats him on the shoulder, somewhat sympathetically. “Good job, kid.”

“I believe, rather than our usual use of robots, it might be beneficial for the students to go up against a live combatant.”

“And who do you have in mind to be this ‘live combatant’?”

“Us, of course! We all are already well aware of the students’ strengths and weaknesses, after all, making us ideal opponents for this assessment.”

When Shouta returns home from the school, having stayed late to grade papers, he finds Hitoshi and Izuku on the couch together, watching a movie.

“I thought you two were supposed to be studying.”

Izuku jolts and nearly falls from the couch in surprise. Hitoshi doesn’t stray his gaze from the TV. “We *are* studying. We’re practicing our English comprehension by watching movies in English.”

Looking at the TV screen, Shouta can see that the movie is indeed in English with English subtitles running along the bottom. Izuku, having regained his balance, furrows his brows as he reads the quickly-moving captions. "I have no idea what's happening," Izuku admits forlornly.

"Doesn't seem like the most effective method of learning." Shouta reaches for the remote to switch off the movie. "Stop wasting your time and get to work."

Hitoshi groans as Izuku graciously grabs his English textbook from where it was discarded on the coffee table. "You just needed to trust in the process a little more, Shirakumo!"

"Sorry, Shinsou, but I think I trust in the textbook's process a little more. Can you please help me with these exercises?"

Izuku's eyes, so wide and pleading, are enough to convince Hitoshi to turn off the TV. A feat that Shouta struggles with even with Hitoshi's more obedient moods.

His own eyes never leaving Izuku's pout, Hitoshi pulls the book between them and opens it to a random page without looking at it. "Okay, yeah, sure."

"I suggest that we pair off the students and match them with a faculty member that will play well with their weaknesses. The assessment will focus on how will they can overcome their own shortcomings in a situation such as this."

"Then I want Hitoshi. He's still too reliant on his Quirk and needs to know how to overcome his opponent without it."

"An excellent idea!"

The parent conferences go well, with some notable exceptions.

Endeavor is surprisingly willing to send Shouto to the UA dorms and is the only parent to not ask about the school's security measures to ensure his child's safety. In fact, the only question he has for Shouta is whether there were cameras in the Sports Festival stadium's hallways—there were of course—and whether that footage still existed—it did. Shouta tells him he isn't sure, but messages Nezu on his way out the door to ask for a copy of the tape. He's immediately sent a video of the Todorokis in an empty hallway, discussing something heatedly, when a heavy veil of fog covers Endeavor's form. When it dissipates, a shocked Endeavor is absent of his iconic flames, and Izuku steps into frame to stand in front of Shouto. Shouta saves the video to his camera roll and makes a mental note to show it to Hizashi later.

His visit with the Iida family concludes with him and Tensei alone in the living room after the Iida parents signed the paperwork without much fuss. Shouta finds that he can't bring himself to look down, to see his friend's atrophied legs confined to a wheelchair. Tensei seems unbothered, though. He understands more than most the dangers of the job, and they both know that it could have ended much, much worse.

(He could have *died*. Another friend lost to this life.)

Shouta saves his visit with the Bakugous—Katsuki *and* Izuku's guardians—for last.

He knocks on the door to their house—an oddly average residence, with groomed flower beds in the yard and a well-worn welcome mat on the porch—and Bakugou Mitsuki is the one to greet him. “Oh, Aizawa! The boys said you'd be coming by sometime this week, although the brats didn't think to warn me it'd be today! My husband isn't around right now—he's at work—so I'll have to be enough for ya.”

She gestures for him to come in, and Shouta toes his shoes off respectfully in the entry. Glancing around briefly—quick enough that it can't be construed as intrusive—he notices an assortment of pictures hung on the walls, most capturing Katsuki and Izuku at different stages of their lives. The one closest to the doorway has them both young enough that they must be toddlers, with Katsuki's hair nothing more than a poof of fluff falling into crimson eyes and Izuku's head covered only by green curls with none of the familiar wisps of fog to accompany it. They're both smiling widely in the picture, sprawled across the grass in matching overalls.

Despite Shouta's attempts to keep his glance at the photo brief, Ms. Bakugou catches it. "Oh, those boys have been close since they were nothing more than snot-nosed kids. Made Izuku's integration into the family a whole lot easier, that's for sure."

Shouta hesitates, mulling how to phrase the question without seeming invasive. "Has Izuku been under your guardianship long?"

Ms. Bakugou snorts, collapsing onto the couch with a nod toward a vacant chair for Shouta to join her. "You can shoot straight with me, Aizawa. Izuku's told me that you were friends with Oboro, so feel free to ask whatever you'd like. I'm sure you got questions."

Caught, Shouta frowns but the promise of answers is too tempting to pass up, so he merely sighs and asks, "What happened to Shirakumo Inko?"

"She's fine if that's what you're worried about," Ms. Bakugou assures him.

"Then why-"

"You're a parent, right Aizawa? Even if you weren't, your job wrangling brats like mine all day would give you the gist of it. Assuming you enjoy it, that is." Shouta begrudgingly admits to himself that he *does* enjoy it. "Oboro was Inko's entire world. She had him so young that that's how it had to be, but she was a damn good mother. And she loved her son."

Shouta remembers visiting Oboro's home back in high school. Inko had always been so relentlessly kind, a solid pillar of warmth and comfort for all three of them. She had come to both of their first two sports festivals, making separate home-made banners to cheer on all three of them in their second year. At sixteen, Shouta was closer to her than he was to his own mother.

(He hasn't seen her since Oboro's death.)

"Losing Oboro... that shit fucked with her head. That fucker of a husband left her to drown in her grief. Not to mention she had a one-year-old to care for on top of it. I did a lot of baby-sitting for her in those first few years, and then when Izuku's Quirk came in, and he looked more and more like Oboro every day, it became a bit more than baby-sitting. I think looking at Izuku every day must've reminded her too much of Oboro, and she just couldn't do it. Poor kid was the sweetest thing too, didn't deserve his own mom to look at him like

that, so I did what I could to take care of him. Wasn't till last year that it became official though."

"Last year?"

"She told that kid that being a hero would kill him like it killed his brother. Said if he wanted to be a hero so bad, then she couldn't be around for it. I ended up signing the guardianship papers the same day that Izuku took the UA entrance exam, and I'm pretty sure none of us have heard from her since. She found a new guy, though, and she's going by his name Midoriya now if you needed to track her down for whatever reason, but Izuku is *my* kid, so I don't know why you would. He has been for a long time, even if the ink's still fresh on the paperwork."

(Why hadn't Shouta visited Inko? Had he really been so selfish to assume that he was the only one struggling after Oboro's death?

No. He just hadn't wanted to see the look in her eyes when she realized that he'd failed to save her son.)

"Oboro was so excited to be a brother," Shouta murmurs, surprising even himself with his words.

"He was," Ms. Bakugou admits easily. "He'd have been a great one too."

(Izuku never got to grow up with a brother.)

"Damn good thing that Izuku had Katsuki," she continues, unconcerned with Shouta's absent gaze. "And that Katsuki had Izuku, in all honesty. Those boys keep each other in check. They may not be blood, but those two are brothers alright."

"I want to pair Hitoshi with Shirakumo. He's a good example of training more than just a Quirk, and I can handle the both of them."

"Normally I would agree with you, but I'd like to suggest pairing him with Bakugou instead. He, like your own suggestion, is a good example of the importance of physical and mental prowess in situations where the use of a Quirk is not ideal. Additionally, he has a

stubborn attitude and doesn't play well with others, which is a habit that needs to be curbed as soon as possible. He works very well with Shirakumo but otherwise struggles with his own attitude with other students, and I've sensed some animosity between him and Shinsou that I would like them to overcome."

During lunch, Hitoshi sits in the classroom with Izuku, Todoroki, and Bakugou. On the surface, all four of them seem to get along well, but Shouta notices the underlying tension in how Izuku leads the conversation. The other three boys only respond to him directly and never interact with each other, but Izuku takes it in stride, clearly aware of the concealed animosity between his friends and never letting the conversation lull into the threatening awkward silence.

Shouta decides to force their hand.

"Shirakumo," he calls. "Come here for a moment please."

Izuku waffles, rightfully hesitant to leave the three other Problem Children to their own devices, but Shouta is impatient, so he raises an eyebrow. Izuku dutifully comes to the front of the classroom, keeping an eye on his friends behind him as he does so.

"Um, is there something wrong, Sensei?"

"Yes, but not with you." Shouta keeps his tone quiet enough that the clearly snooping boys can't overhear. "Take a walk to Recovery Girl's office and back. I want to see what *they* do while you're gone, and they're left to themselves."

"Is that... Is that really a good idea?"

"Possibly not," Shouta admits, shrugging indifferently. "But you can't play mediator forever. If there's going to be an altercation, better that it happens now where I can control it."

Doubtfully, Izuku glances back to his group, then nods slowly.

"Okay..." He signs something quickly to Bakugou as he walks out the door, but Shouta can't quite make it out from his angle.

As soon as Izuku is out the door, Bakugou switches off his cochlear

implant, closing his eyes and resting his head back against his chair. Todoroki and Hitoshi glance at each other, then eat their food in silence. When Hitoshi glances in his direction, suspicious, Shouta schools his face into indifference but doesn't break the eye contact.

Finally, his son glances at Bakugou, who is still mentally absent, then turns to Todoroki. "Um, so Izuku said that I shouldn't... Well, he told me that what I said was really hurtful to you—he didn't explain why!" he rushes when one of Todoroki's furrowed eyebrows turns frosty. "He just said that I shouldn't say that kind of thing again, and I wanted you to know that I, uh, won't do that? And uh, you seem kind of chill—ha, that was an unintentional pun, I promise—so I was hoping we could get along, maybe? Sorry, this is weird. I'll just eat my lunch then." Hitoshi does indeed shove a pile of food into his mouth, blushing furiously.

Todoroki looks back to his soba, nodding. "I appreciate that. Thank you."

"Okay, okay, great." Hitoshi glances at Shouta, who nods in approval.

Bakugou scrunches his nose, eyes still closed and CI still disconnected, as if he can smell the reconciliation and doesn't like the scent of it. Hitoshi dithers, reaching out tentatively to poke the sleeping bear, but somehow Bakugou anticipates him before contact. He cracks open a single crimson eye and bares his teeth like a wild animal. Cowed, Hitoshi returns to his food.

Shouta sighs and returns to grading his papers. Seems like the two will have to settle their differences during the practical exam after all.

"What about Shirakumo?"

"I believe it would be apt to pair him with Todoroki, who could benefit from Shirakumo's proficiency at strategic Quirk use. He tends to focus more on technical skill and strength and could likely learn from Shirakumo's creativity."

The studying sessions in Shouta's apartment become a common occurrence in the days leading up to the final exam, and Shouta is pleasantly surprised to find Todoroki joining in more often than not. Although he doesn't seem to actually need the help studying, and only occasionally engages with Izuku and Hitoshi about the homework they're working on.

When Shouta finally asks Hitoshi why Todoroki hangs around for so long when he doesn't appear to need to, Hitoshi tells him, with a significant look, "He said he doesn't want to go home. He'd rather be here with us."

Shouta decides that the dorms might serve more of a purpose than just protecting his kids from bonafide villains. He's glad that they're being implemented.

The next time Todoroki comes over, Shouta pointedly comments that the cameras of the Sports Festival arena picked up some interesting interactions in the hallways between competitions. Izuku tenses, face draining of all color, but Todoroki perks up and asks if any of those videos had been saved.

Shouta happily connects his cell phone to the TV screen, so they can watch Izuku humiliate Endeavor in high definition. Todoroki's lips lift at the edges in the biggest smile Shouta's seen of him yet, and Shouta wonders if he's ever been so proud of his students as he is of Izuku for managing to do that.

Of course, Shouta is more than happy to send the video to Hitoshi, who sends it to both Izuku and Todoroki in their group chat. After that, Shouta notices that Todoroki seems a little more comfortable in his home and more willing to participate in Izuku and Hitoshi's conversations.

On days that Todoroki doesn't join, the study sessions have a good chance of devolving into a movie or video game night. If Shouta were more responsible, he would reprimand his students for fooling around when they're supposed to be studying, but he sees the happy smile on Hitoshi's face, and he can't bring himself to do it. His stupidly soft heart is just too pleased to see his son enjoying himself and forming connections with his classmates.

And if Hitoshi sits a little closer to Izuku than is normal for just a friendship, with their legs pressed together as they watch movies, and

if Izuku sometimes dozes with his head on Hitoshi's shoulder... Well, Shouta had already promised himself that he wouldn't comment on it. Hitoshi's been without friends for so long, bounced around in foster homes too quickly to form lasting connections, that Shouta doesn't want to mock him for this. He'd rather let their relationship progress naturally than make Hitoshi feel self-conscious about anything. For now, Shouta would put his role of teasing parent on hold and be just the supportive parent watching silently from the sidelines.

Today, being a 'supportive parent' means making the kids snacks while they play video games. Without Todoroki around to keep them on track, it took less than an hour for Hitoshi and Izuku to give up on their supposed studying and switch to more fun activities instead. Again, Shouta decides not to scold them for it, but he does vindictively slice some carrots for them as a snack. Hitoshi hates carrots.

They're in the middle of a game when he comes back to the living room, so he just sets the plate of carrots down on the table in front of them, shuffling Izuku's hair as he moves back to the kitchen.

"Thanks, Dad," Izuku says distractedly.

Immediately, both cars on screen crash. Shouta and Izuku stare at each other silently.

Then, abruptly, Izuku stands. "I have somewhere to be!" He glances at his bare wrist. "I'm late. I have to go, uh, right now." He grabs his things, not even bothering to waste time shoving them into his backpack and fumbling with his books as he struggles to open the front door. "I have to find a very tall building and jump off of it now. Bye!"

As the door starts to swing closed behind him, Shouta calls, "Don't make jokes like that, Problem Child!" He realizes too late that he does indeed sound like a dad.

Hitoshi laughs so hard that he falls off of the couch.

For the rest of the week, Izuku can't make eye contact with Shouta without blushing.

“Todoroki and Shirakumo are an acceptable pair. Shirakumo needs to learn to be more confident in his strategies, too, and bossing Todoroki around will do him good. Is it safe to assume that you already have someone in mind to be their opponent?”

“Correct! Although, it admittedly wasn’t my idea.”

The day of the practical exams, his students are too confident for their own good, but Shouta knows that this confidence is severely misplaced. He smiles to himself, imagining the inevitable despair on their faces when the true nature of the exams is revealed.

The moment is just as wonderful as he expected. Kaminari and Ashido physically collapse to the ground in defeat, and most of the other students have gone pale at the idea of fighting their teachers. Hitoshi is the only one to seem relieved, probably having expected his Quirk to be useless against the robots and glad to think that he can rely on it now that he’s faced with a breathing opponent.

That relief won’t last long once he knows he’s against Shouta.

As Nezu explains the logistics of the exam—a rather simplistic defeat-or-escape scenario—Shouta takes a moment to look over his students, dressed in their hero costumes in front of him. He’s seen them before, of course, in footage of their training with All Might and at the USJ, but he doesn’t typically concern himself with the aesthetic choices of his students. Or aesthetic choices in general, really. His own Eraserhead costume is an example of how he values functionality over fashion.

This still holds true, of course. But now, there are a couple students whose costumes stand out to him.

Unsurprisingly, Hitoshi has clearly modeled his own costume after Shouta’s, and it consists of little more than a dark jumpsuit and a thin capture weapon across his shoulders. The only noticeable difference is the mouth piece, currently hanging just under his jaw. It appears similar to the common model of ventilator used by many heroes, but Shouta knows that its true use is to act as an amplifier and modifier for Hitoshi’s voice, able to adjust his volume and tone without interfering with the activation of his Quirk.

Iida is dressed as a near-identical image of Ingenium, all blocky armor and white steel. Shouta can't look at him without seeing Tensei, so strong and noble before his career was ended so violently. Shouta has to turn his gaze away.

Of course, it's Izuku—Loud Cloud—that he sees next and that is objectively worse. Yet Shouta can't bring himself to avert his eyes.

When Shouta first saw his costume, in the footage of that first battle trial run by All Might, all he could think was that Izuku was the spitting image of his brother. Now, though, Shouta's focus catches on the differences in his costume just as much as the similarities.

It's the jacket that hurts to look at. It's so similar to Oboro's—a thick bomber jacket, made of a leather-like fabric with a small patch over the breast—that before, Shouta was never able to really see anything else. The design of it is clearly meant to be an homage to the original Loud Cloud and can't be mere coincidence.

The color is different, though—a dark army green instead of the familiar worn brown—and it's not until now that Shouta realizes why. With Izuku standing side-by-side with Katsuki, it's clear that the two are intended to be a pair. The jacket matches perfectly to the green of Bakugou's grenade-shaped gauntlets, and the similarities don't end there.

The other colors of Izuku's costume—the orange-red of his goggles and shoes, the black of his jumpsuit—all directly coordinate to Bakugou. When Izuku turns, Shouta notices for the first time the orange X crossing across the back of his jacket, an exact replica of the one on Bakugou's chest.

(Izuku's costume is an amalgamation of both of his brothers, and apparently Bakugou's influence is heavier than Oboro's.)

Oboro's costume had been based off of martial artists, with his dark blue Gi and the quarter staff strapped to his back.

Izuku is made to look more like a fighter pilot. With Bakugou by his side, the two of them combined are a bomber jet eager to see battle.

It's no wonder that when Nezu mentions that the students will be paired for their exams, they both instinctively gravitate toward each other. As a duo, they would be formidable.

Shouta almost laughs aloud at their evident disappointment when

they're informed that the pairs have been selected for them. Well, for Izuku it's disappointment. Bakugou appears furious.

"The matches will be as follows," Nezu announces, and the students straighten in determination as their names are read off.

"Shinsou and Bakugou"—Hitoshi pales suddenly, eyes flickering to his snarling partner—"will be against Eraserhead." Somehow, Hitoshi pales even more. Bakugou, on the other hand, grins maniacally. Shouta knows him well enough by now to know that he's eager for the challenge.

"Todoroki and Shirakumo." The two glance at each other, Todoroki with something akin to relief in his eyes—probably at the realization that he's paired with someone he knows he can trust. Izuku is the only one in the class that Todoroki has had any kind of visible relationship with. Pairing him with anyone else would likely have ended poorly for both him and his partner.

Izuku smiles when they make eye contact, but only briefly. Almost to himself, Shouta can only barely hear him murmur, "The only faculty member left is..."

A shadow falls over the pair of them.

"Oh no," Izuku whispers.

"Todoroki and Shirakumo," Nezu reiterates, having paused for dramatic effect, "will be facing off against All Might. Plus Ultra and good luck to you all!"

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Just a bit of a warning, there's about a 50/50 chance I don't post a chapter for this fic next Monday! I'm starting to catch up what I have prewritten (I have up till the next chapter completed right now), and I don't want to post everything I have then be forced to go on a long hiatus while I try to catch up. So, while I write some more chapters, this fic might switch to a more biweekly update schedule so I can still be somewhat consistent with updates.

That being said, it might be possible that I randomly find the time to crank out several chapters of this at once, in which case I'll continue the weekly updates. Just for now, don't be surprised if there's no update next Monday! I'll let you know what's going on

for sure when I do get chapter 7 posted. I appreciate y'all's patience!

Next time: We kick off the final exams with Insomnya and King Explosion Murder VS Eraserhead

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

A buzz sounds across the arena, and Nezu's pre-recorded voice announces, "Bakugou and Shinsou: exam start!"

Chapter Notes

please gaze upon [this lovely art](#) from athenoot on tumblr!!!
izuku's so cute and soft, and i love this interpretation of his costume!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The kids are given thirty minutes to plan and strategize before the first of the exams start. They'll occur semi-simultaneously, with each exam beginning ten minutes after the one before. Shouta would consider this illogical if All Might's fight wasn't the last, making this an obvious—and reasonable—ploy to give Todoroki and Shirakumo even just a few more minutes to prepare.

While the students find their partners, the teachers congregate outside of hearing range so they can plan in private. Shouta finds a spot where he can sit in the grass and stretch while simultaneously keeping an eye on Hitoshi and Bakugou. Not for the nefarious purpose of spying, necessarily. Shouta's just considered that his students will fight each other before they fight him.

Predictably, it's Hitoshi who approaches Bakugou who hasn't moved from Izuku's side. He tries to initiate conversation, but Bakugou very pointedly reaches up to his ear to flick off his cochlear implant. Izuku visibly sighs helplessly, reangling himself to sign with jittery movements to Bakugou.

This, Shouta can make out even from his distance, and he eavesdrops unashamedly.

"Explosion"—probably a sign name for Bakugou, and a fitting one—"don't be mean. Stop it."

Bakugou glares, glancing at Hitoshi who is watching their conversation with furrowed brows. Shouta hasn't taught him sign yet, since most hero students learn it in their second year of school anyway, and it hasn't been a pressing issue before.

After determining that Hitoshi can't understand them, Bakugou replies, "He is an asshole."

The gesture Izuku makes with his hands next is not technically a sign but is universally construed as exasperation. "So are you!"

"I do not want to work with him."

"If you lose then you can't go to camp with me."

"I will not lose."

"You will. Tired is strong"—was Shouta supposed to be 'tired?'—"and you cannot beat him alone."

"Do not fucking doubt me."

"Please. Do it for me." Izuku turns large, wide eyes on Bakugou, hands clasped together in a begging motion.

Bakugou visibly wavers.

Then, Izuku strikes. "If I go to camp, and you do not, you will be alone with Mom-Yell."

Angrily, Bakugou turns his CI back on, and Hitoshi jumps when he spins on him. Bakugou barks something in his face, then stomps away, and Hitoshi looks back at Izuku frantically who just shrugs and gestures in Bakugou's direction. Resigned, Hitoshi trudges after him, but Shouta figures that even with Bakugou physically able to hear Hitoshi, there still won't be much communication between the two of them.

Todoroki, who has been standing on the outskirts of the conversation waiting for an unintrusive moment, is finally able to approach Izuku safely. Izuku smiles at him, a little wobbly and nervous, and they sit down together on the grass, heads bowed together and speaking quietly.

Their match will not be an easy one. Shouta hopes they can plan adequately.

Shouta's fight against Bakugou and his son is first in the order, so after fifteen minutes, he stands leisurely and steps into the shuttle that will take him to the cityscape that will be the exam's setting. The boys will arrive themselves in another fifteen minutes, so Shouta has the advantage of settling into the environment first, to get a feel for it.

He finds a building about halfway between the cityscape's entrance and the gate that will serve as the 'finish line' should the students decide to evade him rather than capture him. Knowing Bakugou, that strategy will be unlikely. Shouta would bet good money that he's planning on attacking him head-on. Hitoshi, under normal circumstances, might prefer the route of escaping rather than direct combat, and he could very well decide to leave his partner and make a break for the exit. That would leave him vulnerable, though, and if Bakugou succumbed to Shouta's expertise, which is a near certainty, he will be easily captured before he can reach the gate.

This meant that the most probable course of action would be for both of them to engage Eraserhead in combat. Unwise of them, certainly, but Shouta could admit that Bakugou was strong, even without his Quirk. If they were smart, they could win, but Shouta would be sure to make it a challenge. He wouldn't give them their win so easily.

Logically, Shouta plans to counter their most likely strategy. The building that he settles on, almost in the center of the most direct route to the exit, is relatively shorter than those around him. This provides him less of a vantage point, but Hitoshi would probably be looking for him on the roofs of taller buildings for that exact reason. Shouta assumes that, even if the boys plan to capture him rather than simply escape, they would still head directly for the exit gate and hope to find him along the way, and this building puts him right on the edge of their most probable path. Even if he won't be able to see them coming, as he would on a taller building, the lower height puts him in a better hearing range, and Bakugou is hardly quiet. He'll likely hear them coming before he sees them, and then he can ambush them as they cross under him.

Catching them off guard would certainly be ideal. Shouta knows firsthand how powerful Bakugou's Quirk is and how expertly he uses it; not just for power but for maneuverability, too. It would be imperative to cancel it out for as long as Shouta possibly can. Bakugou is powerful without it, certainly, but with it he is near untouchable without a lot of effort that Shouta doesn't feel like expending.

Cancelling Bakugou's Quirk would also be important for Hitoshi to see

just how important it is to not rely solely on a Quirk.

Here's the secret of this battle: Shouta isn't really aiming to win it.

Granted, he isn't going to roll over and let his students win either. That's not the point. The *point* is to teach his students their own weaknesses and force them to overcome them on the spot. For Bakugou, that weakness is his stubborn attitude and refusal to communicate or participate with others as equals. For Hitoshi, it's his overdependency on his Quirk and reluctance to train himself in other areas.

Shouta's role in this exam is to provide his students opportunities to persevere over their shortcomings. This means that if Hitoshi continues to rely solely on his Quirk, and Bakugou doesn't depend on his partner, they will fail. Shouta can beat them easily if this is the case.

In fact, the teachers' supposed handicaps aren't even actually weighted. They just give the students the appearance of a fair fight, and it's up to their proctors whether they deserve to pass or not. If Shouta sees no progress in addressing their own weaknesses, he'll make sure that they fail.

A buzz sounds across the arena, and Nezu's pre-recorded voice announces, "Bakugou and Shinsou: exam start!"

Shouta crouches low, and he waits.

He doesn't have to wait long. Soon, he can hear Bakugou's explosions coming closer at an incredibly fast rate. When he peeks over the edge of the building, he sees his student barreling down the street, Hitoshi nowhere in sight. If Bakugou had taken off without him at full speed, like Shouta expected, Hitoshi would have had no chance of keeping up.

Shouta sighs. Bakugou's failure to work as a team isn't surprising, but still ultimately disappointing. He doesn't particularly enjoy failing his students, but he will have to if it means teaching him this valuable lesson.

"C'mon, stop hiding! I know you won't let me get to the finish, so come out and fight me already!"

Shouta continues to wait. He waits until Bakugou is almost directly beneath his building, still rocketing forward and hopelessly unaware

of Eraserhead above him.

That's when Shouta drops.

He activates Erasure as he falls, and the sudden loss of his propulsive explosions sends Bakugou stumbling forward, coming to a stop just below Shouta. Bakugou crouches into a combative stance but spins to look behind himself rather than upward. He's clearly unaware of Eraserhead's tendency to attack from above, then.

Because of this, it's easy to fling his scarf ahead of himself, the end of it wrapping around Bakugou before he has any chance of retaliation. He fights valiantly to escape his restraints, but with his Quirk cancelled, it's impossible. The capture weapon is built to outlast even stronger opponents than Bakugou.

Shouta lands, crouched on a raging Bakugou's shoulders, tugging tightly on his capture weapon to secure it over his arms and torso.

"That was disappointing," Shouta remarks as he climbs off of him. "Are you alone out here? Where's your partner?"

"I don't need that fucking freak to beat you!"

Lifting an eyebrow, Shouta pointedly scans Bakugou's restrained form.

Bakugou spits, the glob of saliva landing just at Shouta's feet. "Just wait! You'll have to blink sometime, old man, and I'll blast myself out of here, no problem.

Shouta hums and readjusts Bakugou's restraints so his hands are no longer tucked in the scarf. Instead, they're trapped with his palms pressed just under his neck.

"*Fuck*," Bakugou hisses.

"You can't beat me on your own. It was foolish of you to refuse the assistance of a partner, and now both of you will fail your exams because of it."

Shouta leaves Bakugou, bound helplessly in the street, and swings himself onto another building, catapulting himself onto the roof of a tall high-rise. From here, he can see most of the city, including the shape of Bakugou futilely wiggling in his restraints.

He can also see the distinct form of Hitoshi, creeping slowly down a

nearby street. He's on the outskirts of the city, nowhere near the more direct route taken by Bakugou, and Shouta wonders if he'd hoped to avoid Eraserhead entirely by straying so far from the city's center. Hitoshi probably expected that Bakugou would distract Eraserhead for longer, giving him a chance to reach the gate.

Instead, he'd only increased the distance between himself and his exit. Bakugou didn't distract Shouta for nearly long enough for Hitoshi to even come close to escaping with current route.

Foolish.

At least Hitoshi is more familiar with Eraserhead's strategies than Bakugou was, sweeping his gaze across the rooftops as he stalks through the streets. It doesn't take long for his eyes to lock onto Shouta, still standing far above him.

Shouta wishes he were close enough to see the look on Hitoshi's face at the sight of him. He'd definitely been hoping to leave Bakugou to deal with Eraserhead during the exam, and even from this distance he's clearly shaken by Eraserhead's leisurely appearance.

They both stare at each other for a short second. Then, Hitoshi takes off running.

Also foolish.

Shouta keeps pace with him easily, keeping to the rooftops as Hitoshi sprints through the streets below him. Following his own mental map of the city's layout, Shouta eventually jumps into the street, several paces in front of Hitoshi. Rather than face him head on, Hitoshi predictably veers onto a nearby side street and continues running. Shouta returns to the rooftops, catching up quickly.

When Shouta can finally see Bakugou's writhing form—still attempting to break free of the capture weapon—down the street from them, he makes his move, jumping from the rooftop with his capture weapon already unraveling from his neck.

Hitoshi anticipates the attack and, this time with nowhere to run, slashes out with his dominant arm. There's the sound of tearing fabric, and Shouta reels in the remainder of his capture weapon, the end of it fluttering listlessly to the ground after being cut from Hitoshi's knife. Wary of the weapon, Shouta adjusts his angle as he falls, landing just outside of Hitoshi's reach.

“Oi, Freakazoid!”

Hitoshi tenses at the sound of Bakugou’s voice, but doesn’t turn back to look at him. He keeps his eyes trained firmly on Shouta.

“I’ve already captured your partner. How much longer do you think you can last against me by yourself?”

To prove his point, Shouta lunges forward and easily dodges the swipe of Hitoshi’s knife as he cracks a knee into his son’s sternum. Hitoshi stumbles backwards, but manages to stay on his feet.

He sloppily dodges Shouta’s next attack, a roundhouse kick aimed at his head that gave him ample room to duck beneath. Crouched in the dirt, Hitoshi stutters, “H-hey, Eraser. Uh, what do you think the Hero Commission would say about you beating up your own son?”

“I am very familiar with how your Quirk works, Hitoshi.” Shouta reminds him, the non-answer not enough to trigger Brainwashing. “If using it is your only plan against me, you have no hope of winning.”

“Why can’t you just-”

“Hey, fucker, cut me out of here!”

Shouta’s been pushing Hitoshi backward, closer and closer to Bakugou who has been thrashing more violently with every step. It is only due to their close relationship that Shouta can see the exact moment that a fleeting idea flashes in Hitoshi’s eyes.

Now, to push.

With another, carefully restrained kick, Hitoshi moves close enough to Bakugou that the blonde could probably bite at his ankles, which Shouta thinks he might actually do.

“You can’t be a hero with only your Quirk, Shinsou,” Shouta growls. “A Quirk doesn’t make a hero. If you don’t put effort into other areas of yourself, you won’t last long in this career.”

(You’ll die.)

Without hesitation, Hitoshi slices his knife through the capture weapon acting as Bakugou’s prison. As Bakugou bursts free, Hitoshi flings his own unraveled capture weapon at Shouta, not to restrain him—which wouldn’t have worked well anyway—but to simply

obscure his vision.

He loses his line of sight for only a moment as he swats down the loose capture weapon, but it's enough time for Hitoshi to shout, "Can you do a flashbang?!" and for Bakugou to reply by, somehow, setting off an explosion reminiscent of a flashbang.

"Obviously!"

At the sudden light, Shouta is forced to clamp his eyes shut as searing pain spikes through his temples. For some reason, his Quirk has always made him abnormally photosensitive to bright lights like those, so it took him several painful seconds—literally painful, he'll have a headache for hours afterwards—to reorient himself.

When he finally manages to open his eyes again, Hitoshi and Bakugou are gone.

They couldn't have made it down the street in that amount of time, even if Bakugou had grabbed Hitoshi and ran. They have to be somewhere nearby, so Shouta holds his breath and listens.

A large part of underground heroics isn't just staying silent. It's also listening for others who are trying to stay silent and failing. Bakugou and Hitoshi, students who haven't learned the tricks of silence yet, fell into this later category. In a controlled environment like this, with no noise pollution, it doesn't take long for Shouta to pick out quiet shuffling and forcibly light breathing nearby.

He follows the sounds to a building adjacent to the street, with the window barely cracked wide enough for a high schooler to slip through. Keeping to the exterior walls, Shouta stays low and out of sight as he creeps toward it. He stops as soon as he can make out quiet conversation.

"Okay"—Hitoshi's voice—"if he hasn't found us yet, then I think we're okay for now, but keep quiet."

"We shouldn't be fucking hiding. Heroes don't hide."

"They do when they need to come up with a plan, which we could've done earlier if *somebody* hadn't ignored me and gone off by himself." Hitoshi's voice, while still hushed, has shifted into a grating hiss that feels unnatural in the city's silence. He's lucky that Shouta's already found them and decided to let their conversation play out, otherwise the abrasive tone would've given their location away anyway.

"I didn't need your fucking help."

"Didn't seem that way when I found you tied up like a spicy burrito."

"Something tells me that even if you were there, you wouldn't have been much help."

For a moment, Shouta can only hear the sound of their slow breaths.

"You're right," Hitoshi finally admits, and Shouta grins in the privacy of the empty city.

"What?"

"What, you don't think you're right? Weird, you seem so arrogant." Bakugou snarls lowly, but Hitoshi continues, "Eraserhead knows my Quirk and how it works. Without it... I'm nothing."

"Damn right, you're not. You might be in the hero course with me, but we are not on the same fucking level. You're just some damn extra that got there through luck, you understand? You beat Deku and all the others with fucking *luck*. Have you put any effort into this or does it not fucking matter to you?"

"I haven't," Hitoshi whispers, so quietly that Shouta has to shuffle closer to the open window to hear it. "Compared to you and... and Shirakumo, I really haven't tried hard at all, have I?" Then, louder: "Is that why you hate me so much?"

"I don't waste my time with lazy-ass nobodies. If you wanna hang with me and Deku, you gotta fuckin' work for it, Freakazoid."

"You're a dick. You know that?"

There's a huff of breath, like Bakugou snorted air quickly through his nose. Another sound just too out of place in this environment, Shouta notes. He'll move stealth training up earlier in the curriculum.

Hitoshi continues, "What gives you the right to decide who's on your level? Or on Shirakumo's? Yeah, maybe I need to train myself harder now to earn my place as a hero, but I still won those fights fairly, even if the surprise of my Quirk gave me advantage. I still beat you."

"You didn't beat me. You beat Deku."

"You're really playing the part of overprotective boyfriend, aren't you?"

"I told you already that he's my fucking *brother*. Shut up." Their volume is increasing now. Shouta is *definitely* moving stealth training to right after the break. "Deku's fucking *mom* was watching. Did you know that, asshole?"

Oh no, Shouta thinks. This is entering more personal territory. As a teacher, should he interrupt?

Unfortunately, his curiosity gets the better of him. He keeps listening.

"The same mom that *abandoned* him because he was 'too weak to survive as a hero and she just couldn't bear to watch another son die.'" Bakugou's voice raises in pitch, sharp and mocking. "Deku begged her for fucking weeks to watch him in the Festival, because he wanted to prove to that bitch that he wasn't weak like she thought. And then you show up with your fucking Quirk and your *fucking* attitude, and you destroyed it for him. Deku trained himself almost to fucking death, and you ruined it with a single fucking question. No effort at all. *That's* why I hate you, Shinsou."

Shouta expects Hitoshi to cower into silence. Instead, he rises to the challenge. "I didn't know that, and I'm sorry I hurt Shirakumo that way. I really am. But I had my own things to prove, Bakugou, and the Sports Festival was my chance to do that too. I refuse to regret my victory, even if I do regret *how* I did it and that it came at a cost to the one person I consider a friend. And Shirakumo has told me he's forgiven me, so what gives you the right to hold a grudge?"

"He *shouldn't* have forgiven you. He forgives way too easily, and I should fucking know," Bakugou hisses. "I've said some cruel fucking shit to him, shit I'm still trying to make up for, and he *still* considers me a friend. He doesn't know what's best for himself."

"You know, my therapist would tell you that it sounds like you're taking out your self-hatred on me, Bakugou."

"You fucker--"

"Did I hit a nerve? Sounds like it was true then."

"I'm fucking leaving."

Damn. Shouta had really hoped they would finally figure themselves out a little bit. It sounds like Hitoshi has at least realized his own shortcomings in his dependency on his Quirk, but if Bakugou walks away now...

“Wait, stop.”

Miraculously, Shouta no longer hears Bakugou’s footsteps. He stopped.

“I... I don’t think I should have said that? I mean, I think it’s true, and you’re an asshole, but I shouldn’t have psychoanalyzed you like that. In fairness, though, you weren’t being that nice either.”

Bakugou stays silent, but he still doesn’t move.

“Let’s make a deal, alright? Neither of us want to be here right now, and neither of us want to fail. As much as you might hate it, we need to work together to pass. So can we just... I don’t know, get along for however long it takes us to beat Eraserhead, and then we can pretend like it never happened?”

A thud. Bakugou sat back down, then.

“Fine.” Silence for a moment. “Deku would tell me to apologize.”

“Are you going to?”

“Hell no.” Silence again. Is Bakugou actually thinking before he speaks? “Not yet. Not until I can tell that you fucking deserve it.”

“Fair enough,” Hitoshi admits. “After this—after we pass, I mean, because I refuse to lose—Maybe I can train with you and Shirakumo? I just don’t really know where to start?”

Bakugou hesitates. “I can’t do anything to stop you, I guess. Do whatever you want.” For Bakugou, that is almost a screaming approval.

“Cool... I look forward to it.”

Silence *again*. More awkward this time too. Shouta wishes he can teach his students how to socialize like proper human beings. Although, he doubts he’d be the best teacher for that class.

Finally, Bakugou coughs. “So do you have a plan or are we gonna sit around and waste our time?”

Rather than continue listening in, Shouta leaves them to plan.

He waits for them near the exit. If they're smart, they'll head straight to the gate and end this quickly.

He hears Hitoshi first, stepping as quietly as he can on an adjacent roof, taller than Shouta's to stay out of sight. Bakugou, meanwhile, comes barreling down the street shortly afterward, clearly intended to be a distraction from the imminent ambush from Hitoshi.

A fair plan, Shouta can admit. For someone less experienced than Eraserhead, it would be natural for their attention to focus entirely on Bakugou and assume that he's simply abandoned his partner again, leaving them open to be attacked by Hitoshi from above.

Even now, when Shouta is fully aware of their plan, he is still forced to make a decision. He can attempt to apprehend Bakugou, as their plan clearly intends him to, and put himself at risk of whatever Hitoshi will do. If he focuses on Hitoshi, though, Bakugou will have a clear shot to the gate, and they'll win handily.

Of course, Shouta has subconsciously formulated several of his own plans that would counter theirs, but he won't be victorious today. He decided that earlier, after hearing their conversation in that building. Hitoshi has recognized the fault of overreliance on his Quirk, and Bakugou has agreed to set his animosity aside and work with a partner. They've already passed Shouta's test, even if they don't know it.

In the end, Shouta's curiosity wins out, and he decides to play into their plan. He ignores Hitoshi creeping up behind him and waits for Bakugou to run beneath him, like he had before.

Predictably, the moment before Shouta would have dropped down onto Bakugou, Hitoshi drops down on him instead. Shouta slows his own reaction time, pretending as if he had been caught off guard, and provides Hitoshi an opportunity to make the first move.

Admittedly, he doesn't expect for the sudden loss of his vision as rough fabric is wrapped tightly around the upper half of his face. The texture is familiar enough that Shouta deduces that this is Hitoshi's capture weapon acting as a makeshift blindfold.

Even without his sight, Shouta spins and lashes out with a high kick, aimed high enough that it should make contact with Hitoshi's cheek if he doesn't dodge. In the same movement, he reaches into the many

pockets of his jumpsuit, aiming to grab a knife and cut himself out of the blindfold.

His kick is blocked, as expected, but it was intended to serve more as a distraction than an offensive ploy. He just needed to get his knife, and-

There's a series of explosions, too close, and Shouta is forced to jump backwards, aborting his grab for the knife in favor of covering his face from the sudden heat. Bakugou has joined them.

Eraserhead, blinded, against two hero students is not a good match-up. Maybe, if he weren't already so willing to let his students have this victory, he could have taken them even with such a blatant disadvantage. Actually, he definitely could have. Eraserhead's been in worse situations than this and found creative ways to persevere. But in this scenario, it seems to be more effort than it's worth.

Still, he needs to put on a show. The students need to believe that they truly won, after all, and if Shouta makes his surrender too obvious, Bakugou will surely throw a fit. So, he listens intently, pinpointing their positions, and launches his capture weapon at Bakugou while simultaneously lunging at Hitoshi.

Without being able to erase Bakugou's Quirk, it would be too risky to fight him blindly. Hitoshi he can combat more safely. Either way, Eraserhead has lost—it's just a matter of time—but Shouta would rather walk away from this without injury.

Just as he expected, he hears Bakugou evade his scarf with a well-timed explosion, and he feels a hand grab at the back of his jumpsuit just as fist brushes against Hitoshi's chest. Shouta is yanked down to the ground, flipped and pinned by Bakugou. Hitoshi clips the Quirk-suppressing cuffs to his wrist.

A buzzer sounds. "Bakugou and Shinsou have passed their exam. Congratulations!"

Bakugou roars, and Shouta can only imagine the relieved grin on Hitoshi's face, but he knows it's there. "Good job, Problem Children. You did well," he tells them.

And he means it.

Hizashi, dressed as Present Mic and hilariously pale in the face, greets Shouta when he and his students return to the rest of the group. Shouta can't help but snort at his friend's gaunt expression. "Bugs?"

Hizashi sighs. "Yep, just like you thought. Why do you always gotta be right, Shou?"

"It's a curse."

"Hey, hey, your match took a long time though. And you lost! The little listeners give you trouble? Is Eraserhead losing his touch?"

"We're just that fucking good," Bakugou boasts. Beside him, Hitoshi is grinning, genuinely. He's been doing that more often lately

"They approached with a logical plan in the end," Shouta admits, but turns to stare down Bakugou from the corner of his eye. "Although I should remind you that I was handicapped in this situation"—not really, but they didn't need to know this—"and if this were an actual fight, I would beat you without problems."

Hitoshi laughs. "Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. C'mon, Hothead, let's go watch the other exams. Someone's gotta still be going if we didn't go straight back to the classroom."

Hizashi and Shouta watch them disappear into the viewing room, and Shouta turns a curious eye on his friend. "What are the results so far?"

"There's only one exam still going. All Might's." Unsurprising, considering it was the last to begin and by far the most difficult to pass. "For everyone else, though, only two teams bit the dust. Mina and Kaminari got taken down way quick, and Kirishima and Satou couldn't outlast Cementoss. Technically, Sero and Yaoyorozu passed, but Sero was snoozing the whole time, so you might decide to grade him differently based on that. She made him a gas mask, and he still managed to get put under by Midnight, can ya believe that?!"

Shouta nods, glancing at the doorway leading into the viewing room. "How are Shirakumo and Todoroki doing?"

Hizashi hisses through his teeth, and Shouta raises an eyebrow, silently demanding that he explain. "It's bad," he admits slowly. "Kinda hard to watch actually. All Might is being a *little* relentless, and the poor kids can't get a hit in or find a way to escape."

Nodding, Shouta prepares himself. He knew that this match would be ugly to watch the minute Nezu told him the pairing, but he can't be biased right now. He walks past Hizashi and into the room.

On the large video screen is All Might. He has Shirakumo Izuku clenched tightly in his grip, one massive hand holding him by the neck as Izuku chokes.

Shouta can only watch as Yagi smashes Izuku into the ground, hard enough that the earsplitting crack can be heard through the poor audio of the footage. Izuku visibly wheezes, blood trickling from his mouth as he strains in All Might's grip. He hadn't even had the time to cushion the blow with his fog like Shouta's seen him do countless times before. Izuku's tired then, or not thinking straight, or even suffering from Quirk exhaustion if he couldn't summon his fog for a hit like that.

"I think he's forgotten the purpose of these exams," Shuzenji murmurs.

Seeing All Might's unrestrained brutality, Shouta has to agree. These exams aren't intended to be real battles between the students and pro heroes, even if that's what the kids were lead to believe. The teachers are supposed to show their students their weaknesses and give them opportunities to learn from them.

Right now, All Might is showing his students that he's stronger than they are and giving them no hope to overcome him.

Through the crackling audio feed, someone yells, "Cover!" and Izuku, still choking on the ground, veils himself in a layer of fog just as flames roar over him and creep over All Might's arm. Instinctively, All Might releases Izuku and a wall of ice immediately forms between them as Todoroki skates into frame, grabbing Izuku and hoisting him into his arms as they dash away.

Izuku says something inaudible to Todoroki, who nods just as All Might breaks free from that formed around the side of his body. Todoroki veers through the opening of a decrepit, abandoned-looking building, and All Might follows them in.

The camera changes to one inside the building, showing the large, open floor plan of a warehouse, the crumbling roof held up by concrete pillars. Todoroki sets Izuku on his feet, watching him as he regains his balance and shakes his head out. The hit from earlier probably gave him a concussion at least. Shouta can only imagine what other, more serious damage, might have been done.

Again, Izuku murmurs something to Todoroki, too quiet to be picked up by the building's mics. The speed of his words and the way that he cuts himself off as All Might comes into view leads Shouta to believe that Izuku had been formulating some kind of plan.

He hopes it'll be enough for All Might.

For a moment, Shirakumo and Todoroki stand in the middle of the warehouse, facing All Might. Each waits for their opponent to make the first move.

"What's wrong, young heroes?" All Might laughs. "Afraid to face me?"

Todoroki frowns, shifting his stance indicatively of making an offensive move. Next to him, Izuku shakes his head.

When the students don't take his bait, All Might shrugs. "No matter. I can always come to you." And he dashes forward.

Both Izuku and Todoroki launch themselves to the side in opposite directions, forming platforms of fog and ice beneath their feet as they ascend to the ceiling. "Don't get hit!" Izuku yells, narrowly avoiding a sickening punch from All Might that cracks the cement of the pillar just behind him.

"You can't avoid me forever!" All Might taunts, his fist smashing into the ceiling just above a ducking Todoroki. "Only cowardly heroes won't face a villain head-on."

"That's not Deku's style," Bakugou observes, watching his brother ricochet between fog platforms. "Bastard doesn't *run* from a fight. He's planning something."

Shouta turns back to the screen, brow furrowed. If he does have a plan, it's subtle enough that not even he can tell what it is.

The next strike from All Might makes contact, sending Izuku flying into a pillar on the edge of the room with an awful *thunk*. Shouta flinches, watching Izuku's eyes flutter as he struggles to stand, Todoroki distracting All Might from his prone teammate as he recovers.

Hizashi, standing close enough to feel Shouta's minute reaction, presses his shoulder against his comfortingly.

(For a moment, with Izuku sitting limp at the base of the pillar,

Shouta had imagined that the impact had killed him.)

Izuku manages to stand, though, but his eyes don't seem to focus correctly. Nevertheless, he rolls out of the way of another hit from All Might, letting it hit the pillar behind him instead. He dashes for Todoroki, who jumps from his icy ledge to land on the ground beside him, backs pressed to one of the warehouse's walls. "Do you think that's enough?" Todoroki asks.

Izuku gestures to the side of his head, where dark blood is matting his curls. "I think it'll have to be. Wait for him to get to the center."

All Might pulls his fist from the center of the pillar he had punctured through and turns as debris falls to his feet. "Are you done running, little heroes? Because I'm happy to meet you over there."

He dashes forward again, aiming straight for Todoroki and Izuku. This time, the students plant their feet and lower themselves into a defensive position. For a moment, Shouta thinks that they've had enough. They've grown tired of this cat-and-mouse game and decided that they'll take their chances facing All Might head on, even if it'll surely end in their defeat.

Shouta is wrong.

"Todoroki, now!"

Both of his students are suddenly engulfed in thick fog, disappearing from sight as a surge of fire erupts outward from their position. The blast spreads through the entire warehouse quickly. Although it's thin enough that All Might doesn't falter in his run, it melts the thick bands of ice created by Todoroki earlier to evade All Might.

Simultaneously, the left-over platforms of fog used by Izuku disappear in a blink.

Shouta suddenly understands.

He had assumed that the abandoned sections of fog and ice had simply been forgotten by Izuku and Todoroki in their desperate attempts to dodge All Might's blows. Instead, they had served a strategic and vital role in supporting the ceiling's infrastructure as All Might unintentionally destroyed the building's support around them.

Without the platforms, the building collapses. Directly on top of them.

(“Shirakumo!”)

For the second time in his life, Shouta can only watch as Loud Cloud is crushed beneath rubble.

Chapter End Notes

Hitoshi and Kacchan arguing loudly in front of an open window:
wow we are so good at sneaking, much stealth

btw ive had someone ask if i've created a discord for this fic (which i have not) but i was wondering if that was something people would be interested in? ive personally never been involved in one, so i'm not entirely sure what it entails, but i'd be more than happy to make one if enough people are interested in it :) let me know!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

For all intents and purposes, they've passed their exam, even if they haven't quite made it to the gate yet.

Which is why Shouta is surprised to see All Might dig himself out from beneath the rubble, leap into the sky, and crash directly in front of Todoroki and Izuku, shattering Todoroki's pathway of ice and intercepting their route to the finish.

Chapter Notes

TW: Panic Attack/Disassociation; it occurs at the very beginning of this chapter, when Shouta thinks that his students have been injured (or even killed) by the building falling on them. It's not super graphic or descriptive (at least not any more so than most of Shouta's random intrusive thoughts throughout the fic), but I'd rather let y'all know to be safe. It ends at "(He hasn't failed them..."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The thing about becoming an underground hero like Eraserhead is that you devote yourself to silence. You don't just *learn* silence, you *become* it. To the point that even your civilian identity and your life outside of hero work is steeped in it, so that you never make any unwarranted noise, no matter the situation.

So, when Shouta panics, he's utterly silent.

His heart continues its steady pulse, his lungs exhale slowly, and his vocal cords don't release the involuntary scream he can feel building up in his chest, pulsing against his throat. His hands grow cold and numb, but his fingers don't clench, or even twitch. His gaze remains steady, still processing his surroundings without processing any other conscious thought.

When he hears something over his shoulder, he still turns his head at the stimulus. You can't afford to let panic seize you in the field and render you immobile. That's what kills you. So he forces himself to respond to the noise, to the voice, and look at the person next to him.

It still takes him a moment longer than it should to process the sounds

as actual words.

“Hey, bud, it’s Hizashi, your bestest pal. That was kinda scary, right? But there’s no need to worry about it, ‘cause the kiddos are just fine, if you wanna take a look. Whenever you’re ready though, dude, don’t push yourself.”

They were *okay*? How could they be *okay*? He just *saw* them buried under the rubble of that building, crushed, more children killed while he could do nothing. Just like Oboro had been.

(“No! Shirakumo!”)

“Seems like the kids had a funky little idea. They *planned* for the building to fall, and they’re A-okay now.”

Another voice, also familiar. Nemuri. “This isn’t like before, Shouta. No one’s hurt this time.”

‘Before.’ She means what happened to Oboro. But this is exactly like Oboro, isn’t it? And he still hadn’t learned after the first time. Even now, when he was older and stronger and better, he still couldn’t save anyone.

(“You’re the only one that can protect everyone!” Oboro’s ghost—a figment of Shouta’s desperate imagination—had told him that once, screamed from beneath the debris of his own collapsed building that Shouta couldn’t save him from. He was *wrong*.)

“They’re alright, Shou. Pinky promise! I wouldn’t lie to ya, right?”

No, Shouta admits. Hizashi isn’t a liar. But he could still be wrong.

“Just take a look at the screen whenever you’re ready, and you’ll see. I promise.”

Finally, Shouta does look. If only because he needs to see them, his failure, for himself. He expects to see their bloody bodies pinned by rubble, a stray limb or two jutting out limply from broken concrete. He expects to see them *dead*.

Instead he sees both of his students still breathing, still moving, *still alive*. Todoroki is skating over a path of ice with Izuku hanging across his back. They are bleeding but conscious. Alive.

Hizashi, noticing Shouta’s sluggish return to awareness, explains,

“They collapsed the building on purpose, I think. To trap All Might under it. And now they’re making a break for it.”

They’re alive. They’re fine. Shouta can breathe again. He can relax.

(He hasn’t failed them. Not like he had Oboro. Not yet.)

The other students in the room appear blissfully unaware of Shouta’s short trip into a mental breakdown, as quiet and unobtrusive as it was. They’re all much too focused on the action happening on the screens in front of them, watching Todoroki and Izuku near the exit of the cityscape to pass their exam.

“What did they *do*?” Shouta asks, voice kept low enough that only Hizashi can hear it over the excited cheers of his students.

“Seemed like they planned for the building to crash all along and left their little thingy-ma-bobs behind to hold up the weight of the ceiling in the areas that All Might had damaged. Once they had him in the center with most of the building ready to fall: *boom*,” Hizashi mimics an explosion, or something similar. Shouta isn’t quite sure.

“Everything came down on top of him. The kiddos must’ve shielded themselves pretty well though, ‘cause they busted out of all that rubble, *no problemo*.”

“I’m expelling them,” Shouta decides.

(He thought they were dead. *Dead*.)

“No, don’t do that! It was a totally rockin’ plan, if you think about it. You’re all about logic, so even you gotta admit that, Shou.”

And logically, Shouta *can* admit that. He just wishes that his students hadn’t given him a heart attack at the young age of thirty-one in the process.

Shouta knows, mostly from personal experience, that fighting a physically strong opponent like All Might with brute strength would have been impossible for Todoroki and Izuku, who didn’t have the same physical capabilities. To come up with a plan like that, which employed a clever use of the environment and the individual capabilities of their own Quirks, as well as their ability to use All Might’s own destructive strength against him, had been extremely logical and well-played.

The execution of their plan also demonstrated Todoroki’s ability to use

his Quirk in new and inventive ways, no doubt following along to Izuku's ideas, rather than simply relying on the actual power and technical skill of his Quirk like usual. Meanwhile, Izuku evidently was able to accept a leadership role over his more stubborn partner, showcasing a level of confidence that he often lacks.

These were the exact obstacles Shouta had hoped to see them overcome in this practical. And they did it. For all intents and purposes, they've passed their exam, even if they haven't quite made it to the gate yet.

Which is why Shouta is surprised to see All Might dig himself out from beneath the rubble, leap into the sky, and crash directly in front of Todoroki and Izuku, shattering Todoroki's pathway of ice and intercepting their route to the finish.

"What the hell is he doing?" he hisses, as Todoroki stumbles. The sudden shift in velocity causes Izuku to slip over his shoulders, tipping over his head and onto the icy ground. For now, Shouta doesn't care if the students in the room hear the vitriol in his remark.

"Something foolish," Shuzenji responds, voice exhaustedly resigned. Shouta is loath to admit it, but he jumps a little bit at her words, having not realized that she's been standing so close to him. "Those boys are going to need some medical attention after this, if things continue on the path they've been on."

She's right. Already, Shouta can see evidence of injury. Bruises, shallow gashes, stiff joints, and that's just what's *visible*. He can tell that Izuku is especially worse for wear with a hazy look in his eye and blood flowing from the wound on his head. Sighing, Shuzenji ducks out of the room, hopefully to get a medical team organized and on standby.

"You can't get away from me so easily, little heroes!" All Might mocks, rushing forward to grab Todoroki by the arm and flip him into the air. Izuku, still on the ground, reaches out a hand futilely, but the fog he creates in an attempt to slow Todoroki's fall is too sparse to adequately slow him as he crashes into the earth. Flat on his stomach and wheezing for breath, Todoroki is easily pinned by All Might as Izuku struggles to stand. "If you want to win, you need to be stronger than me."

Shouta's fists clench. This isn't how the tests are supposed to go. Does All Might seriously expect two students, two *children*, to surpass *him*?

Japan's greatest hero? The notion is inconceivable. If that is what he expects of them, there is no possible way for Izuku and Todoroki to pass this exam.

"No one's stronger than fucking All Might," Bakugou hisses, unknowingly voicing Shouta's own thoughts. The other students, and Shouta notices some of the present faculty too, nod in stunned agreement. "This has to be a joke. They were doomed to fail from the fucking start."

Izuku shakily brings himself back to his feet. He glances at Todoroki, both of their gazes hooded and pained, then past All Might to where the gate lays. So close yet impossibly out of his reach.

He and All Might stare at each other for a moment, just watching. Then, Izuku takes off like a shot, forming wispy footholds as he rises up, and up, and up, aiming to go over All Might rather than around him. His platforms, only large enough to fit the ball of his foot, aren't as well-defined along the edges as what Shouta's used to seeing from him, and Izuku's feet sink into them as he steps, like they aren't quite solid. Still he perseveres, panting as he trudges high above All Might as quickly as he can.

And All Might just reaches up, leaning slightly on the tips of his toes, to hook a finger around Izuku's ankle. Then, he pulls him to the ground with a thundering crack.

Izuku gasps as he hits the concrete, remnants of fog spilling from him but unable to form anything cohesive enough to help.

"You can't always run from your problems," All Might says.

Weakly, Izuku attempts to lever himself up onto an elbow, only to collapse back to the ground. His eyes flutter shut.

A buzzer sounds. "Shirakumo and Todoroki have failed their exam."

The students are not easily convinced to wait outside of the nurse's office rather than storm in to check on their resting friends. Even Shouta's threats of expulsion aren't as effective as they usually are, and they don't manage to scare the small crowd of students

congregated at Recovery Girl's door like Shouta had hoped.

It isn't until Shuzenji herself shuffles into the hallway, waving her cane and imploring that the students let her patients rest, that most of them finally skulk away, albeit reluctantly. Only Hitoshi and Bakugou remain, one with a flimsy facade of indifference, and the other almost literally fuming.

"Don't I get fucking visitation rights? I'm family."

Shuzenji smoothly whaps him with her cane. "Language, dear. You can come in when your guardian arrives. I've already spoken to her over the phone, and she should be here shortly. For now, let your brother rest. Aizawa, you come with me, please."

Dutifully, Shouta follows her into her office, ignoring Hitoshi's imploring look and Bakugou's gnashing teeth as he passes them. Once inside, he can see the still bodies of Todoroki and Izuku, both on their backs with their arms resting at their sides, skin pale except for the darkened blemishes of bruises and wounds. Shouta takes a second to watch their chests and process their soft breaths before he turns to Shuzenji.

"Injuries?"

"First of all, they're both doing fine and will be right as rain in a couple of days at most, so wipe that look off your face, dear." Shouta isn't sure what 'look' she means, but he schools his face back into its practiced indifferent frown. "Todoroki is a little better off than Shirakumo. Just some serious bruising around his ribs and back, and a couple shallow cuts that seem to be caused by random debris in the environment, as well as a couple of broken ribs, but that was the worst of it. He was conscious earlier but fell asleep once I healed him.

"Shirakumo has more severe injuries, but nothing life-threatening or permanent. At the very least, All Might held himself back enough to avoid crippling his students." Shouta is pleased to hear the faint anger and disbelief in Shuzenji's even tone. "He had five broken ribs, one very close to puncturing his lung which I healed promptly, so it's no longer an issue. Unfortunately, his exhaustion—both physical and from Quirk overuse—means that is about all I could do for him today. His cuts are all shallow, and only one needed any kind of stitches. His spine, while technically undamaged, seems to have been misaligned, and he'll be in a bit of pain until he gets the energy back for me to heal that one, but it shouldn't be long-lasting. Aside from that, he does

have a concussion, but he'll have to let that one heal on its own. Treating any kind of brain trauma with my Quirk can be risky, and it appears to be mild enough that I won't risk it. Everything else can be treated with painkillers for the next couple days, until he's all healed up. Both him and Todoroki are fine to leave once they wake up and as long as someone comes to pick them up. I'd rather they not go home by themselves in this state, especially Shirakumo. Someone needs to keep an eye on him with his concussion."

Someone knocks on the door, too heavy to be Hitoshi but too timid to be Bakugou. When Shuzenji waves him away, Shouta swings the door open to be faced with All Might standing sheepishly in the hallway. Shouta remains stone-faced, even while met with All Might's pleading look. He glances past him to see Bakugou and Hitoshi further down the hallway, both watching All Might with annoyance. So they also aren't pleased with how his exam had been conducted. Good.

All Might just shuffles, a little awkwardly for his large form, as Shouta continues to block the doorway, more than content to watch the brawny hero squirm under Shouta's stony expression. Finally, when the silence has gone on too long for him to handle, All Might coughs. "Uh, I just wanted to check on young Todoroki and Shirakumo and see how they are faring after their exam."

Shouta scans him, eyes narrowing on how strained his grin is. "No."

All Might sputters. "No? But I-"

From inside the nurse's office, Shuzenji shouts, "Let's not forget why they're here in the first place, Yagi."

At All Might's subsequent flinch, Shouta's lip quirks for a split second before returning to its stern frown. "You and I are going to talk first, All Might. Then we'll decide where to go from there."

"Well, uh, may I just-"

"No. Follow me." Before Shouta steps into the hallway, he turns back to Shuzenji. "Let me know if there's any change in their condition."

She rolls her eyes. "They'll be fine, Aizawa. I'm good at my job. Please, reprimand that buffoon of a man before I do something much more drastic to him."

Nodding, Shouta lets the door swing behind himself, too quickly for anyone to peek in, despite Hitoshi and Bakugou's attempts, and stalks

down the hallway. He only checks to make sure All Might's following once he's about to turn the corner. Shouta unlocks one of the school's private meeting rooms, holding the door open for All Might to enter before him. Once they've both stepped inside, he flips the lock and leans against a wall as All Might sits in a chair.

Head bowed and palms resting on his knees, All Might looks perfectly apologetic. "I suppose I may have been a bit... reckless in my handling of Shirakumo and Todoroki's exam."

Shouta waits, but when All Might doesn't continue, he flatly offers, "No other students required medical attention. Not even the others that failed."

"Yes, well, like I said... Reckless. But I was simply treating this battle how I thought a villain would act in such a situation."

"Our job is not to be villains. It is to be *teachers*. These battles were not meant to be simulations of a real fight. They were meant to be *exams*, with an objective to be completed."

"I wanted to make sure they were ready for the careers they have chosen! By those standards, they failed their 'objective,' did they not? Isn't that your own way of teaching, Aizawa? Failing the students that aren't ready to survive on their own?"

(They *aren't* ready to survive on their own. The world will *kill them*.)

"How did you expect them to defeat you?" Shouta waits, but All Might says nothing. "How did you expect them to prove their strength when faced with Japan's strongest hero?" Again, nothing. "None of these students would have passed their exams if the purpose were to defeat an actual pro-hero, All Might. Which is why they weren't expected to. They're *students*. They're not yet heroes. They're learning, and it's our jobs to teach them. I don't fail students because they aren't already skilled heroes. I fail them because they don't have the *potential* to become skilled heroes. As far as I'm concerned, both Todoroki and Shirakumo showed that they had that potential. Which makes me wonder what standards of *yours* they didn't meet."

All Might's head bows lower, clearly ashamed, but Shouta refuses to back off. "If you're unsure, then allow me to theorize. I think this was purely an advertisement for your own Quirk. To prove to Shirakumo that, without One for All, he won't be *strong*, and if he's not strong then he won't be good enough. I think this was all some kind of manipulation tactic to persuade him to take your Quirk, since it'll

supposedly make him a great hero like you are, and Todoroki was merely collateral. Am I wrong?”

This time, Shouta lets the silence curdle, watching as All Might’s hands curl into fists. “I admit that that’s... not incorrect.” Shouta scoffs, but All Might trudges on. “I want Shirakumo to take One for All, of course I do. I have no doubt that he’s the best choice of a successor. But I didn’t so much want to show him that he’s weak as I wanted to show him that there are opponents... there are villains he will face that are *strong*. Stronger than him. And sometimes, you’ll need some strength of your own to be victorious in the end. Even with One for All, I have been hurt and injured and weakened beyond repair... I can only imagine what kind of damage would have been done to me had I not had this strength at my disposal. I admit that I may have gone a bit overboard and proven my point a little *too* well, but I only want those kids to be prepared for anything they might face as heroes. I just want them to be ready.”

“You think strength is equivalent to preparation?”

All Might shrugs. “Is it not?”

Shouta wants to argue. He really does. After all, Eraserhead is far from a traditionally ‘strong’ hero. Quick and agile, yes, but not superhumanly strong like All Might. But there’s a reason he’s so well-suited for underground heroics, where he relies on his stealth to ambush and apprehend criminals. He can’t deny that, in many situations, the strong heroes are preferred over the quiet ones. Physical strength is certainly a powerful asset. So, all Shouta replies with is, “It’s only one aspect of a good hero. There are other qualities to value that Shirakumo already has.”

Again, All Might shrugs, “Strength alone has gotten me this far. I simply wish to give Shirakumo—and Todoroki and the others—their best chances as a hero. Although I do admit that my methods in this instance were... harsh and unjust. I did not wish to cause them such injury.”

Shouta wants to tell him that he caused those boys more than just *physical* injury. While Shouta can’t speak much for Todoroki, he’s close enough to Izuku to know that his confidence is sometimes held together by a thin string. He constantly feels the need to prove himself and his capabilities, if the Sports Festival and their discussion after the One for All offer had been any indications. Shouta can only imagine how such a thorough beatdown from All Might could have unraveled

that fragile self-esteem, even if the defeat had been unfair and unwarranted.

Instead, Shouta just glares and tells him, “You will apologize to both Todoroki and Shirakumo. It is your responsibility alone that they failed that exam when they absolutely should have passed it by anyone else’s standards, so you’ll be the one to explain your decision. In fact, if that decision hadn’t already been made, visibly in front of all the other students, I would certainly be reversing their grade, but I can’t justifiably disagree with your victory and undermine your judgement. So, at the very least, you will apologize for causing them the unnecessary loss. Understand?”

“Certainly! I was actually planning to apologize for my rough behavior when I visited them.”

“You will not be visiting with them,” Shouta decides. Truthfully, he just wants a chance to talk to Izuku before All Might can. “You’ll apologize when you next see them in classes, when they’re healed from the injuries that you’ve caused them.”

All Might nods, blushing bashfully. “I suppose that that makes sense...”

“Good. We’re done here, then.”

“Ah, wait, Aizawa, I’ve been meaning to ask if-”

Shouta slams the door behind himself before All Might can finish.

Unfortunately, Shouta does not get the chance to speak to Izuku, or Todoroki, until class the next morning. By the time he had returned to Shuzenji’s office the day before, they had both already been picked up by their respective guardians.

Since Shouta is chronically unable to arrive at UA more than fifteen minutes early, Izuku and Todoroki are already present when he and Hitoshi arrive. They’re sullen-faced, clearly disappointed in themselves after their loss yesterday and probably by their foreseen exclusion from the camping trip. Usually, in the mornings, Bakugou and Izuku bicker while Todoroki listens quietly nearby, occasionally piping in

with a comment of his own to upset the balance of their inane arguments, but today they each sit silently in their own desks. Even Bakugou looks more *genuinely* irritated than his usual annoyed facade.

There are too many other students in the classroom for Shouta to surreptitiously draw them away right now, so he nudges Hitoshi toward his desk purposefully while Shouta waits by the door, unnoticed by most of the class. They had agreed that, in a situation like this, Hitoshi would approach Izuku and Todoroki first. He'd make sure that they'd visited Recovery Girl that day and, if not, convince them to at least go during lunch. Shouta also knew that Hitoshi would check on them emotionally, at least as best as he's able, which he would have done even without Shouta's prompting.

Even though Shouta hopes that Izuku and Todoroki will be able to recognize the unfairness of their exam, just as Hitoshi and even Bakugou could as only observers, he knows that this is an unrealistic expectation. They're more likely to be disappointed in themselves than frustrated with All Might's relentless attitude toward them.

Hitoshi walks to his seat, returning Bakugou's amicable nod as he passes him, and Shouta is glad that at least some students have been able to take something valuable away from their exams. When he nears Izuku, Hitoshi brushes his fingers across the top of his shoulder to get his attention, and Izuku twists in his seat to watch Hitoshi as he sits behind him. They speak quietly, and while Izuku starts the conversation with a small smile, it begins to fade as Hitoshi speaks, probably talking to him about the fight with All Might. Clearly Izuku is attempting to put on an optimistic face, but Hitoshi meets Shouta's eyes when he turns back in his seat and shakes his head.

Izuku's upset with himself, just as Shouta expected him to be.

Hitoshi turns to Todoroki next. Their conversation is much more clipped and visibly stilted, with Todoroki more outwardly ill-tempered than Izuku presented himself to be, but it ends with the same slow shake of Hitoshi's head.

Well, then. Shouta will have to speak with them both to make sure that they understand that their failure is no fault of their own.

The bell rings, and he stalks to his podium, rapping on the wood purposely to draw his students' attention. Most of them look eager for the last day of school before break, although those that have failed their exams—aside from the more pensive Izuku and Todoroki—look

resigned to their time in remedial classes.

Shouta's eager to see their mixed reactions to learning just how those remedial classes will be conducted.

Once his students are sitting, straight-backed in their seats, Shouta speaks. "Some of you have failed your exams." Izuku clenches his fingers around his pencil tight enough for Shouta to hear it crack. "Although, when it comes to the training camp... everyone will be attending."

The relieved shock on his student's face is enough for Shouta to grin, a little maniacally. He loves to hear them cry over his logical ruses. It's truly the best part of his job.

He lets them cheer for a moment, noticing that despite the minute relaxation of their shoulders, Izuku and Todoroki aren't quite as gleeful as the others. Obviously still suspicious or thinking themselves undeserving of the good news. "Surprisingly," he continues over Ashido's squealing, "none of you failed your written exams. As for the practicals, Todoroki and Shirakumo"—both students grimace—"Ashido and Kaminari, Kirishima and Satou, and Sero have failed. Us teachers acting as villains made sure to leave openings for the students to win, to see how you would approach your obstacles. If we hadn't, *all* of you would have failed."

Well, most teachers had done this at least.

Bakugou rolls his eyes, muttering something under his breath that Izuku only sighs at. Shouta isn't sure whether it's a foolhardy declaration that he would've been victorious even without the fight being thrown in their favor, or a criticism of the apparent lack of openings in the battle with All Might. Knowing Bakugou, it could have gone either way.

"The training camp in the woods is exactly as its name implies: a *training* camp. Those who have failed obviously need this training more than the others, so it would be illogical to exclude them."

The failed students look rightfully ashamed. Except Todoroki and Izuku, who only look *undeservedly* ashamed as they stare blankly at their desks.

It does hurt to lump Todoroki and Izuku into the same category as the others who have failed, only because their exam was hopeless from the start. They had shown the skills and potential necessary to pass, if

All Might had just given them the opportunity to do so.

“Threatening you with exclusion from the camp was simply a logical ruse.”

Abruptly, Iida stands from his seat, politely raising his hand even as he loudly exclaims, “That’s twice that you’ve tricked us! Aren’t you afraid that our faith in you will waver?!”

(“You’d be pretty good working with kids,” Oboro had told him once. Shouta still isn’t sure if that was true.)

Shouta isn’t *afraid* that it’ll happen. He *knows* that it will. He’s seen it with every group of his students, that growing resentment that they hold toward him and his deceptions. But he didn’t enact his logical ruses to be *friendly*. He did it to make his students better, stronger, to force them to give everything they had to their training.

Shouta didn’t care if his students grew to hate him over time. He only cared that they would be great heroes.

(He only cared that they’d *survive* as heroes.)

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he tells Iida, mostly just to placate him. He ignores Hitoshi’s—and Izuku’s—stare as he continues. “Although, I wasn’t entirely lying. Failure is failure. There will be time made for extra lessons for those who failed. Frankly, you’ll wish that you’d stayed at school for the break anyway. I recommend that you be prepared for that.”

Only Izuku and Todoroki look as if they’ll be taking this seriously. Ironical that they’re the ones that actually need it the least.

During a free moment when Shouta would usually be napping, he calls Todoroki and Izuku into the hallway with him, Izuku dragging his feet behind his more stone-faced friend out the door. They probably think Shouta is going to reprimand them for their performance during the exams, when he has no intention to do any such thing.

He starts plainly. “You two should not have failed your practical

exam. Your performance was more than enough to meet my expectations—in all honesty, you *exceeded* them. If it had been my decision, you would have passed.”

Both students stare at him, mouths agape. Finally, Todoroki asks, “Then why-”

“Simply stated, All Might decided to take matters into his own hands and presented you with unrealistic expectations. No one should have been expected to defeat him under those circumstances, let alone two students, but you two persevered admirably, even if it ended in your loss. Unfortunately, I cannot undermine All Might’s decision to have failed you, since it would call into question the validity of the other exams as well, although I honestly would do so if Nezu allowed me to. As such, I did think it was important for you both to know that your failure was by no fault of your own.”

“No fault of our own...” Izuku repeats, a little distantly. “All Might was just better.”

“Yes, the country’s best hero was better than two first-year students. A shocker, really.” Shouta hopes that the humor doesn’t detract from the truth behind his statement. He doesn’t want Izuku, or Todoroki, to compare themselves to All Might, especially not when that was what All Might *wanted* to happen, so that Izuku’s inferiority would convince him to accept One for All.

It at least gets a smile from each of his students, Todoroki’s only *slightly* more muted than Izuku’s, so Shouta will count it as a personal victory.

“If he heeds my advice—which he *should* if he has any sense—All Might should be apologizing to you both personally for his shortcomings as a teacher. You will let me know if his apology is inadequate, so that I can deal with him myself. Now, both of you, back into class. You have an essay to finish writing before the end of the day.”

Todoroki nods stiffly and disappears into the classroom without a backward glance. Izuku, though, remains in the hallway, and wrings his hands together.

“If you have something to say, Problem Child, then you should just say it.”

“I was just wondering... It kind of seems like, um... Did All Might...

Did he fail us because of *me*?”

Shouta sighs. Hesitantly, he reaches out to place his palm lightly on Izuku’s shoulder, settling it more firmly when Izuku doesn’t shy away from the touch. “That’s probably a question better saved for All Might, but no matter his reason, it was unfair to the both of you. Not just to Todoroki,” Shouta emphasizes, “but you too. You did well during your exam, Problem Child, and formulated a very logical plan for the situation that you were in. If it had been anyone else other than All Might, it would have been very effective. Although I would prefer less collapsing buildings next time.”

Shouta pretends to not notice Izuku’s minute flinch, likely having interpreted the truth behind the raw honesty in that request. He continues, “As far as I’m concerned, you exceeded the expectations to pass the exam. I’m proud of you, Izuku. You did very well.”

Izuku beams, mist twining along his lower lashes like unshed tears. Quickly, so quickly that Shouta staggers backward in brief surprise, he surges forward to wrap his arms around Shouta’s midsection. “Thanks, Sensei.” He darts back into the classroom before Shouta can even react.

(“You’d be pretty good working with kids,” Oboro had told him once. Maybe—*maybe*—there was more truth in that statement than Shouta had thought.)

Chapter End Notes

this is not intended to be an all might bashing fic, but it tends to worm itself in there anyway... i just have issues with certain actions by all might apparently, lol

also just a head's up that i've signed up for the bnha bang!! i'm very excited for it and will be writing a kiribakudeku fic where they are all dragons!!! ive never participated in a bang but i will do my best!!

however, this means that if i have another wip to work on, and since it has an actual deadline, it might need to take priority over my current multi-chap fics. this could mean reverting to a less often updating schedule, but i will always let you know if i need to skip an update. feel free to follow me on tumblr if you want accurate updating schedules from me!!

that being said, next chapter will probably be two weeks from

now! we're shifting into the next arc, and we all know that the training camp is usually pretty dense, so i'm going to try to take my time with it and make sure the final product is the best it can be. i appreciate y'all's patience!! if you miss dadzawa too badly, you can always read my AfO!Izuku AU or even some of my other fics if you're desperate lol (im partial to the Pokemon AU fic and i wish it got more love haha)

see you soon!

next up: izuku and hitoshi go to the mall!!! they'll have lots of fun there i'm sure :)

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

“Hey, uh, Dad? Is it okay if I go to the mall today?”

“You want to go to the mall... by yourself.”

Now Hitoshi blushes. “Well, no.”

Chapter Notes

thank you all for your patience this past week! it seems i'll be following a biweekly schedule for a bit, because i've been very busy recently, but once i catch back up with my writing, i'll return to the weekly updates!

this one's a little shorter, but it felt right to end it like i did, so deal with it lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hey, uh, Dad? Is it okay if I go to the mall today?”

Shouta looks up from his laptop for the first time in what feels like hours. Glancing at the clock confirms that it actually *has* been hours. Patrol the night before had been more active than usual, and he'd returned to a very long email from Tsukauchi concerning recent activity from the League of Villains that needed to be looked into. Aside from a brief interlude of unconsciousness in this armchair about two hours ago, Shouta hasn't slept in nearly 48 hours.

Still, Hitoshi wouldn't have asked to go to the mall unless he really needed something. He hates the mall, with its crowds and noise and claustrophobically small stores, so whatever it was must be important.

Reluctantly, Shouta powers off his laptop and stretches his arms over his head. “Sure. Let me just change, and-”

“Oh, uh, I was actually... You don't need to come with me?”

Shouta merely blinks, watching how Hitoshi doesn't meet his eyes. “You want to go to the mall... by yourself.”

Now Hitoshi *blushes*. “Well, no.”

The doorbell rings, and Shouta grins. “Oh? Should I go answer that?”

Immediately, Hitoshi races to the door, cracking it open to tell whoever is on the other side—as if Shouta doesn’t have a guess—to wait in the hallway for a moment.

“No need to wait out there,” Shouta decides for him, coming to stand just behind Hitoshi as he hurriedly tries to force the door closed. Unfortunately, Shouta’s faster and stronger, and he wrenches the door out of his son’s grip to reveal a beaming, yet somewhat confused, Izuku. Surprise, surprise. “Hello, Izuku. You can come in for a moment. Hitoshi’s very excited to go to the mall with you.”

Izuku politely toes off his shoes in the entryway. “Pardon the intrusion.” Behind him, Hitoshi mimics choking Shouta and then stabbing him with a knife.

“Are you going to the mall dressed like that?” Shouta asks him casually, eyeing the cat-themed pajama bottoms. Hitoshi pales as Izuku turns to look quizzically and giggles.

“They’re cute and all, but you should probably put on actual pants? Although, it’s my own fault maybe, since I got here kind of early... Sorry!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I’ll be *right back*,” Hitoshi promises, just as much a reassurance for Izuku as a threat for Shouta, and he runs down the hallway to his room, slipping on his socked feet as he goes.

Shouta knows that he promised himself not to tease Hitoshi, not for this, but sometimes he just made it too easy. He doesn’t even realize that he’s snickering under his breath until he notices the odd, off-put stare from Izuku, and he forcibly shakes himself out of it. “Keep an eye on my problem child, okay, Problem Child?”

Izuku nods vigorously. “Of course! The others will all be there too, so there’s nothing to worry about!”

Others? So this isn’t the one-on-one outing Shouta had assumed it to be. Oh, well. They’ll get there eventually.

(Did they have the time for ‘eventually’? Shouta didn’t. Not with Oboro.)

Frantic rattling comes from Hitoshi’s room, followed by a blur as he darts from the bedroom to the bathroom. Then, more rattling. Shouta

wonders what exactly Hitoshi's getting up to in there, but he's sure to find out soon enough. He can be patient.

Jerking his head, Shouta gestures for Izuku to follow him into the living room, since it seems that Hitoshi will be a while longer. "Did All Might apologize like he said he would?"

"Oh, uh, yeah..."

Shouta raises an eyebrow. "And?"

"Well, he initially told Todoroki and I that he was just trying to act like a real villain would... but when Todoroki left, I asked if it was about One for All, and he admitted that that was part of it. So now I feel bad that Todoroki failed his exam because of me! 'Cause All Might doesn't think I'm strong enough on my own, which I already knew, and now we've both failed our exam, but at least this is my mess, poor Todoroki's just involved without even knowing it!"

"Breathe, Problem Child," Shouta instructs, waiting for Izuku to follow his direction before continuing. "It was All Might's decision to indirectly involve Todoroki, not yours. Besides, his pride was perhaps a little damaged, but he'll recover. But, Izuku, if you know that All Might's treatment of you during the exam was a ploy to convince you to accept his Quirk, do you think it was an effective one?"

Izuku slumps deeper into the couch cushions, avoiding Shouta's eyes. "I mean... I don't really like how All Might went about it, but I kind of get it? I can train all I want, but it'll still be nothing compared to the power in a Quirk like One for All."

"Strength isn't everything."

"I know that, I do, but it's *something*. And I could use it to become a better hero, even if I don't really, uh, *need* it? I don't know... I just want to be able to help people, however I can do it the best I can."

"Who else have you asked? What do they think?" Shouta hopes that there are some rational people offering Izuku advice in this situation.

"Well, I told Kacchan, of course,"—Shouta's hopes were obviously unfounded—"and he thinks I should take it. He says I can handle it, and it'll only make me stronger, so why wouldn't I? And well..." Izuku glances down the hallway, and Shouta chokes.

"You told Hitoshi?!"

“You told me to ask people I trust!” Izuku defends.

Admittedly, Shouta’s not so much surprised that Izuku talked to Hitoshi about it as he is that Hitoshi didn’t mention it to him, but that’s fine. He’ll let his son keep his secrets for now.

“And what did he say?”

Izuku sighs, a puff of frustrated air that briefly makes Shouta smile. “He wasn’t much help. He said that he understood the appeal of getting stronger and more powerful, but that he didn’t think I needed it, since I already have a Quirk I’m good with using. Then, he said his opinion didn’t even really matter, since it’s my decision anyway, which isn’t really true, because *I* think his opinion matters,” he grumbles, before catching himself on his tangent. “Yeah, so I don’t know what to do! I’m not good with big decisions like this!”

“You’re better at them than you think,” Shouta tells him, remembering Izuku’s rationality during the USJ attack and his quick strategies during his exam. Down the hallway, he can hear the bathroom door creak open and Hitoshi’s hurried footsteps, so he stands to pat Izuku on the shoulder, ending their conversation. “You’ll make the right choice for yourself, Izuku. Just keep thinking on it.”

From his new position beside the couch, Shouta sees Hitoshi slipping down the hallway, and he can’t quite hide his grin at his appearance, although he manages to bite his lip so it’s only a muted smile. He’s dressed casually, sure, in a t-shirt and dark jeans, but it’s the first time in a long time that Shouta’s seen him out of sweatpants when he’s not forced into his school uniform. And he knows that the t-shirt was a gift from Hizashi, who only buys Hitoshi clothes from those trendy teen stores. When Hitoshi steps into the light, Shouta can see a faint gleam in his hair, like he’d attempted to gel it into a more manageable style, only to give up when it wouldn’t hold. He also notices that the ever-present dark circles under his son’s eyes are a little less apparent, the skin a little brighter.

Attempting to look subtle, Shouta brushes past Hitoshi as he leaves the living room. He whispers, low enough for Izuku to not hear, “Are you wearing the concealer Nemuri bought you?”

“Shut up. I’m switching all your coffee to decaf.”

Shouta at least has the decency to wait until they’re out the door, Hitoshi yanking Izuku by the wrist, to break into hysterical laughter.

He even manages to get a brief nap in during the couple of hours that they're gone, before he's woken up by a sudden phone call on his personal cell.

Hitoshi's voice on the other line: "Dad, you need to come to the police station. Shigaraki Tomura grabbed us at the mall."

Shouta spends too much of his time at the Musutafu Police Station. It's enough that when he barrels through the door, not even dressed in his Eraserhead costume, the officers recognize him as that one hero who comes in at the dead of night to do odd jobs for the detectives.

Officer Sansa—who Shouta only remembers the name of because he has a literal cat head—stands from his desk to greet him. "Eraserhead! Detective Tsukauchi is in a witness meeting right now, but—"

Shouta strides past him, heading down the hallway he knows holds the meeting rooms. "Which room?"

"Well, I'm not sure—"

Spinning, Shouta fixes Sansa with a menacing, red-eyed glare. "Which. Room."

Sansa squeaks. "Third door on the right."

He doesn't bother knocking, swinging the door open without any warning and marching toward the Problem Children sitting at the table to look them over for injury, and ignores Tsukauchi's surprised, "Aizawa?" as he walks past him.

"Are you hurt?" Shouta asks, twisting Hitoshi's chin to check his neck for any blemishes.

"We're *fine*, Dad."

"Dad?" Tsukauchi repeats.

Shouta turns to Izuku, who smiles shakily under his scrutinizing look. "How do you get into these situations, Problem Child?" he mutters, combing his fingers through the cold wisps of fog in his hair and gently shaking his head with his grip.

"I don't *mean* to!" Izuku sputters, as Hitoshi petulantly huffs "Hey, I was there too," at the same time.

Sighing through his nose, Shouta tugs one final time on both of his boys' hair before circling around the table to collapse into the empty chair next to Tsukauchi. "What happened?"

Tsukauchi, instead of answering usefully, looks back and forth between Shouta and the kids. "You're... their guardian?"

"Just his"—Shouta points to Hitoshi, who flicks his hand in a wave—"but the other one's basically my problem anyway, so I'd like to know what happened, if anyone would care to enlighten me."

Izuku is the one to take the initiative, which is why he's Shouta's favorite. "Well, we were at the mall, and the class split up to get what they needed, and it was just Hitoshi and I, and then Shigaraki came up behind us and put his arms around us so his hands were on our necks, with just one finger lifted, so he could, uh..."

"It was a threat," Hitoshi continues for him, leaning closer into Izuku's space even though their chairs were already positioned close together. "He said he just wanted to talk, and if we did anything then he'd kill us and as many civilians as he could before any help could actually come. So, we listened."

"Good," Shouta praises. "It was better to have stayed calm than risk causing trouble in a situation like that."

(He could've lost his kids today.)

"I told them the same thing," Tsukauchi agrees. Shouta glares at him from the corner of his eye. He'd already had his chance to interrogate the boys, and these were *Shouta's* kids, so he didn't need to interject while Shouta asked his questions.

Taking the hint like the smart detective he is, Tsukauchi ducks his head to write notes in the margin of his paperwork.

"What else did he say?"

"He talked *a lot* about the Hero Killer," Izuku says. "He seemed kind of jealous? Like he was mad that someone else was getting attention instead of the League."

Hitoshi adds, "He asked us why we thought that was... which is where

we might have screwed up a little bit.”

Izuku nods, biting his lip.

“What did you do, Problem Children?”

Hitoshi elbows Izuku in the side, and he yelps. “I didn’t know how else to answer, okay?! So I was just honest and said whatever came to mind...”

“Which was?”

Izuku mumbles something, suddenly unable to lift his gaze from the table. Sighing, Hitoshi takes over. “He told Shigaraki that Stain was popular because he had *conviction*, and didn’t give up on his ideals even in a hopeless situation.”

Shouta stares. He blinks. “You told the villain that’s tried to kill you—maybe twice now—that he lacked conviction. And that he should be more determined to carry out his plans to fruition.”

Pressing his face into his palms, Izuku wails. “I just knew I had to keep talking! I wasn’t really paying attention to what I was saying at that point!” Hitoshi pats his shoulder, a little too stiffly to really be comforting.

Shouta groans and rubs the bridge of his nose. “No, no, you did well considering the circumstances and your lack of training and preparedness for a situation like that. Protecting civilian lives, as well as your own, should have been your main concern, regardless of what you said. What’s done is done. Now, we’ll just have to prepare for whatever Shigaraki has planned.”

“I’m sorry,” Izuku whimpers, but Shouta waves him off.

“Don’t be.” He turns to Tsukauchi, who has resorted to doodling on his paperwork to simulate privacy for their conversation. “Are you done with them? If Shirakumo hasn’t contacted his guardian, I can take him home.”

“Yeah, they were just finishing up their statement when you got here, so they’re good to go. Unfortunately, this incident didn’t really provide us any additional information about the League’s intentions or their whereabouts, but I’d rather that everyone got out safely than the alternative, so you boys did very well considering the situation at hand.” Tsukauchi turned back to Shouta and handed him one of the

folders on the stack. “It seems like the encounter with Tomura was just coincidence, but we should be wary of the League targeting any students. The Hero Commission has decided it’s worthwhile to create a police-hero taskforce to focus on the League. I assumed you’d want to be involved.”

Shouta accepts the folder gladly.

“An officer has already contacted Shirakumo’s guardian, since we already had her number on file after an incident last year. Sansa paged me that she arrived just a minute ago, so she should be in the lobby.”

“An incident?”

“Villain attack,” Tsukauchi clarifies as he stands, and Shouta lifts a questioning eyebrow to Izuku, who squeaks and attempts to duck behind Hitoshi. This isn’t very successful, since Hitoshi himself turns to look at Izuku curiously as they shuffle into the hallway.

“It wasn’t a big deal! Just some weird villain made of slime that attacked Kacchan and I on our way home from school last... last year.” Izuku’s face falls. “Uh, Detective? You said that you called the same emergency contact as last year?”

“Sure did.”

“Oh...”

Obviously concerned by Izuku’s change in demeanor, his posture now more closed off than before, Hitoshi brushes his fingers against his hand questioningly. Izuku shakes his head, smiling dimly, and offers a faint, reassuring squeeze of their hands before letting the contact slip away, which Shouta pretends not to notice.

Before Shouta can ask about his morose hesitance, Tsukauchi opens the door to the station’s empty entryway, waving politely as he disappears back down the hallway, and Shouta is suddenly in the same room with Shirakumo Inko.

Initially, she doesn’t even notice him.

Inko’s attention is devoted entirely to Izuku, who steps to the side, putting distance between himself and Hitoshi without moving closer to his mother as she rushes forward. She crowds Izuku, completely ignoring the two other people, and Shouta realizes that Izuku had

likely purposely distanced himself from Hitoshi to save him from being shoved aside by Inko anyway.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, she grasps Izuku's cheeks between both hands. "Oh, my baby! Are you okay?! They said you were attacked by a villain, oh my god! I told you that this was too dangerous for you! I just knew it!"

"I'm okay. I didn't even get hurt." Izuku attempts to pull himself away, taking her wrists in his hands to pull them down from his face, but Inko only sobs louder and wraps her arms around him tightly to clutch him to her chest.

"You say that now, but it's only a matter of time! You're going to get yourself *killed* like this!"

("Just like Oboro," Shouta doesn't add.)

"Ms. Shirakumo," Shouta tries. She ignores him, so he tries again, this time reaching to gently pull Izuku back by the shoulders, unwilling to risk touching the distressed mother. "*Ms. Shirakumo.*"

With Izuku being extricated from her grip, Inko's attention shifts, and her eyes lock onto Shouta's. "It's Midoriya." She blinks once. Twice. Trying to put a name to the face. Then, she pales. "Shouta?"

"Hello, Ms. Shira- Ms. Midoriya," Shouta greets, because he's unsure of what else to say. He shifts Izuku, now free, to stand next to Hitoshi who looks a little lost but offers his hand to Shirakumo.

Evidently confused, Inko wrinkles her brow. "Why are you...?"

"I'm Izuku's homeroom teacher," he explains, "as well as his friend's guardian. He was involved in today's incident as well, so I came to pick him up."

At the mention of the 'incident,' the tears return to Inko's eyes, and she reaches to take Izuku by the wrists, pulling his hand from Hitoshi's in the process. "Oh, honey, don't you see how dangerous this is?! You didn't listen to me when you were attacked the first time, but now it's happened again! Please, *please*, reconsider what this school is going to do to you!" She glances at Shouta as she says this, and he realizes that he's technically part of path that she's trying to dissuade Izuku from. "If you change your mind, if you leave UA, you can come home with me! Doesn't that sound nice? I just can't handle this, knowing that you're putting yourself at risk everyday like that! Why

are you doing this to me?! How am I supposed to cope, when I can lose another one of my sons at any moment?! You're the only one I have left!"

Izuku suddenly hiccups, flinching as his own eyes blur with thick fog. "Mom, I- I *can't*."

Shouta realizes, suddenly, that his breaths are coming in short bursts, his skin abnormally pale and his pupils blown wide. Izuku is panicking.

"Ms. Midoriya, I'm going to have to ask that you let go of Izuku."

She whirls on him, fingers still wrapped around Izuku's wrists, although Shouta can see minute relaxation in their grip. "I understand you're apparently his teacher, Shou-" She coughs, "Aizawa, but I'm his *mother*. I deserve some judgement in his education after something like this."

"Actually, Ms. Midoriya, you were contacted by mistake. There was no reason for you to come to the station today."

"Mistake? So he wasn't attacked?"

Finally, she releases Izuku. Hitoshi, who had been hovering worriedly nearby, holds out an arm, and Izuku sinks bonelessly into his side as Hitoshi murmurs under his breath. Shouta catches his eye and flicks his gaze to the other end of the room, and Hitoshi nods, guiding Izuku to sit in a chair out of earshot of the approaching conversation.

Knowing that Izuku is taken care of for the time being, Shouta focuses on Inko.

"He was not attacked. Not physically at least, and he's unharmed, but that's not what I had meant when I said you had been contacted by mistake. Ms. Midoriya, you are no longer Izuku's legal guardian. You should not be here."

She freezes, tears still tracking silently down her face.

Shouta continues, "Unfortunately, you resigned all rights to dictating any part of Izuku's schooling, as well as any rights to be involved in any police matters concerning him. Legally, you should not be aware of this case or even be in the station right now. I will have to ask you to leave."

“But... but Shouta, *I can't do that*,” she whimpers. Her eyes glance toward Izuku, curled into Hitoshi's side in a small plastic chair as he attempts to slow his stuttering breaths. When she looks back to Shouta, her gaze is frantic, and she steps closer to him. “You understand, right? You *have to*. He's just like him. He's... he's going to get himself killed, just like Oboro did, and I'm supposed to *let him*?”

(“My *mom* can't even look at me without seeing my brother,” Izuku had told him, “but I'm *not* him.”)

“Ms. Midoriya, you can't-”

“You were there, right?” she whispers, and Shouta goes cold. “They said you were... that you watched as my son was crushed beneath that building. And now... Izuku... will you just watch as this life destroys him too?”

(“Shirakumo!”)

“I'm sorry,” he tells her, and he at least partially means it. He's sorry that it's come to this, that the Shirakumo family is so strained that he has to separate Inko from this situation for her own son's sake. He's sorry that the happy, comforting memories he once held of Shirakumo Inko have been tainted by this facsimile so desperate to cling onto the faint memory of one son that she's suffocated the other. He's sorry that he hadn't been strong enough to save Oboro and to save her from this grief.

But he won't be sorry for doing his best for Shirakumo Izuku now.

“Ms. Midoriya, you need to leave.”

As he'd originally suggested, Shouta takes Izuku home.

The boys are completely silent, tucked together in the back of Shouta's car as he drives. Izuku had mostly calmed down by the time Shouta ushered Inko from the station, with only a slight tremor in his hands and hazy fog over his eyes to indicate his earlier distress. He'd followed Hitoshi to the car without fuss, clutching his hand tightly, and still hasn't spoken about the earlier altercation as Shouta drives him home.

In fact, it's not until Shouta pulls up outside the Bakugou house, where he can see Katsuki pacing the porch like a vicious guard dog, that Izuku says anything at all.

"Being a hero is all I've ever wanted..."

The car stops, and Katsuki's head swivels toward them like a predator searching for his prey. He doesn't come closer, though, and Izuku doesn't leave the car. Everyone waits.

"It's been my dream, since... since *forever*," Izuku whimpers, and Shouta can see Hitoshi squeeze his hand in the rearview mirror. Slowly, Shouta turns to face the backseat. "It's not because of... It's not because of Oboro. At least, it's not because I want to revive his legacy or anything. Well, maybe that's *part* of it... but that's not why it's my dream."

Izuku stares out the window, gaze too blank to really *see* anything. "I just want to save people. And maybe part of that is because of Oboro... because I've seen what happens when someone isn't saved, and I don't want anyone else to hurt like that... But everyone thinks I'm just trying to become Oboro, and that's not it. That's not what I want. I don't know that I ever really wanted that... I'm not him. I'm *me*."

"I know that, Izuku," Hitoshi says, tugging lightly on Izuku's hands until his head turns. "*We* know that. You're not him. You're Loud Cloud, but you're not *him*."

Izuku smiles. "I know. Thank you. It's nice to have people that see me."

He gets out of the car, and Katsuki is on him the moment the door shuts, crowding into him without impeding his walk to the porch. Izuku seems to be responding to him, even if his expression is still a little vacant. When he steps into the house, he turns to wave shyly back at Shouta's car before the door closes behind them.

Chapter End Notes

as of posting this fic, i somehow have finished writing the next chapter!!! it def needs a good run through, but the training camp arc is gonna be Hell to write because it's so dense... anyhow, because i have it finished, and i'll likely be working on the chapter after it this next week, hopefully i'll be back to weekly updates! still, if i feel like im falling behind with my writing, i'll

go back to biweekly, but i'll absolutely let y'all know!!! feel free to follow my tumblr for updates on my posting schedule <3

also question for y'all: If i made a discord for my fics, would you guys have any interest? I've never been involved in a discord, so im not entirely sure what that entails, but ive had a couple people ask in the comments about a discord so i thought i'd ask y'all. Please, let me know if you'd be interested!!! and if you'd want a separate one for each fic individually, or just one discord for all my fics, with separate channeles, or whatever? I'm not at all sure how it works lol

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

This was the one week of the year Shouta wakes before sundown. Usually, at 5:30 AM he's just finishing patrol, hoping to squeeze in a nap on the couch before ushering himself and Hitoshi to school, but today he is well-rested as the sun banks over the forest, staring down his twenty problem children who don't look remotely ready for the hell he's about to put them through.

Chapter Notes

hi guys! i made a discord! join it here: <https://discord.gg/u2Zb2vVz>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shigaraki finding his kids at the mall scares the UA faculty enough that they change the location of the summer camp. Now, only Shouta, Vlad, Nezu and the Pussycats will know where the students are during the break. Shouta hopes that it'll be enough to keep them safe.

“Oi, the bus will stop in about an hour. Then-” Shouta looks back. No one is listening. Not even Hitoshi, who should know better than to ignore Shouta, is already asleep with his head on Izuku's shoulder while Izuku argues playfully with Bakugou in the seat behind them, Todoroki watching the exchange with a small smile. All the kids are too eager for the camp to pay any attention to Shouta's instructions.

He'll let them have this. He'll let them have the chance to be kids before they're forced to be heroes again.

When the bus does stop, the students file out without hesitation, too trusting of Shouta and unaware of what exactly he has in store. Of course, Hitoshi is the first to sense that something is amiss. He's spent too long around Shouta and his logical ruses to not recognize one in action, and Izuku isn't too far behind him.

“Where's Class B?” Izuku asks, hesitantly like he's afraid of the answer. “And what's that other car doing here?”

Hitoshi only shakes his head. He must know that the situation is already hopeless.

From there, only Bakugou and Todoroki seem to pick up on their friend's unease. The rest of the class are leisurely stretching their legs, completely unprepared for what will be the true start to their training camp.

"Hey there, Eraser!"

Politely, Shouta bows. The Pussycats are a little too enthusiastic for his own tastes, too loud and brightly colored, but he respects the work that they do. Rescue heroes are often just as underappreciated as underground heroes, so they have some common ground in that respect.

He lets them introduce themselves with their typical fanfare and watches the young boy that had stepped out of the car behind him, too quiet and disinterested to be here of his own free-will. In fact, the attitude is familiarly reminiscent of Hitoshi when he had just been adopted by Shouta, distrustful of the world and his new guardian. He remembers Mandalay having mentioned a recently orphaned nephew. This is probably him.

"You'll be staying at the base of the mountain wayyyyyy over there," Mandalay explains.

Uraraka tilts her head. "Then why did we stop here?"

Immediately, Hitoshi and Izuku each take a step closer to Shouta, on edge and foolishly deeming Shouta safe from whatever is about to occur. Izuku's eyes are veiled with thin fog, ready to activate his Quirk at any moment, so Shouta kicks him in the back of the knees as he moves to the side. "Let it happen," he instructs, "or no dinner when you finally make it to the lodge."

"Oh no," Hitoshi laments.

"It's 9:30 right now..." Mandalay continues, "so maybe you'll be there by noon if you're fast."

The other students are finally realizing what's about to occur, hurriedly moving back to the bus, but it's too late. They won't make it in time.

"Sorry, boys and girls!" Pixie-bob sings as she lands in front of them, blocking the students' path of escape. She presses her horrific paw mittens into the ground, and the earth crumbles at her touch. "Your training camp has already begun!"

Hitoshi and Izuku barely manage to shoot Shouta a betrayed glance—Hitoshi murmuring, “Et tu, Brute?” under his breath—before the dirt surges beneath them and throws them into the air with a cloud of dust. Shouta leisurely strolls to glance over the railing to find that Izuku had managed to form a viscous pillow of fog to catch the students with no means to slow their fall. Smart and considerate of him, but to create a fog that large and thick likely took a lot of effort. If he continues using his Quirk at the same rate in the forest, he’ll dehydrate himself quickly.

Mandalay leans over the railing as well. “This is private land, so feel free to use your Quirks! You’ll need them to survive the Beast’s Forest and make it to the facility!”

The kids pale and turn to the forest behind them. There’s a crash near the tree line, and Pixie-bob giggles from somewhere behind Shouta. “They’ll have their work cut out for them. Kind of intense for the first-years, but it’s always nice to have some fun with them.”

Mandalay hums as Todoroki, Bakugou, Iida, and Izuku all race into the forest. “Some of them are real go-getters, huh?”

“They have this handled,” Shouta decides, stepping away from the railing to walk back to the bus. There’s no possible way that they’ll arrive at the lodge by noon, like Mandalay had suggested, but they’ll get there by the end of the night, he is sure.

“Wow, Eraser has faith in his class this year? How rare!”

“They must be some strong kids if you’re putting them through the second year trials already! The next generation of heroes are already proving themselves!”

Mandalay’s nephew scoffs and rolls his eyes.

“It’s not about faith,” Shouta admits. He thinks about the USJ incident, about the Nomu attack in Hosu, about Shigaraki confronting his kids in a public mall. “They’ve already faced more than most second or third year students, and it’s possible that they’ll continue to be endangered at this rate. It’s only logical to make sure that they’re more prepared than the average first year. With villain activity as it is right now, they need to be able to defend themselves properly.”

An explosion sounds in the distance and a puff of dust rises above the trees. Pixie-Bob smiles gleefully. “So strong...”

Mandalay smiles, tail swaying behind her. “You just head to the lodge and relax. We’ll take good care of them, Eraser!”

(“You’re the only one that can protect them!” that figment of imagination had told Shouta long ago. *The only one. Not Pixie-Bob. Not the Pussycats. Only you.*

But hasn’t he failed to do that already?)

“I’ll leave them to you, Pixie-Bob.”

It takes his class eight hours to traverse the Beast’s Forest, which is about what Shouta had expected of them. Mandalay and Pixie-Bob had both estimated nine hours, and Tiger and Ragdoll had guessed ten. They all bet two thousand yen on it, so Shouta is now eight thousand yen richer.

He is impressed, though, that everyone is still on their feet when they break through the tree line, even if they do immediately collapse to the ground once they’ve reached their goal. Shouta immediately tosses a water bottle to a pale and clearly dehydrated Izuku, who has fallen to his knees against Hitoshi, but his reflexes are too sluggish to catch it before it pegs him in the face. Shouta snorts, which Hitoshi glares at half-heartedly, but Izuku seems to have not even registered the impact and fumbles eagerly for the bottle on the ground. He nearly guzzles the water in its entirety before Bakugou pulls it from his chapped lips and hoarsely instructs him to take small sips.

“Good job, good job! Some of you kids sure are strong!” Pixie-Bob dances around them, even as the kids wheeze from their spots on the ground, too exhausted to care for her praise.

Hitoshi, whose Quirk had been unsuited for the exercise and therefore seems more aware of his surroundings than his classmates, pushes Pixie-Bob away from an exhausted Izuku as she coos and attempts to squeeze his cheeks. “Get away from him, you old-”

Predictably, she turns on Hitoshi, eyes gleaming with a predatory light. “Think twice before you finish that sentence, kid.”

Hitoshi pales, and Shouta smirks as he watches him scramble for something to change the subject. He settles on Mandalay’s nephew.

“Uh, who’s that kid?”

Mandalay glances to the child, as if she had forgotten he was there. “Oh, that’s Kouta, my cousin’s kid. Kouta, say hello. Make some friends.”

Kouta does not say hello.

Instead, he scans the group of students with an expression of clear malice and distrust before scoffing and turning away. “Don’t bother. I don’t intend to make friends with people that want to be *heroes*,” he spits, and Shouta blinks at the sudden animosity. He had assumed Kouta’s surly appearance had simply been that of a recently bereaved child feeling depressed and uncomfortable by the sudden change in his routine. Hitoshi had acted similarly when Shouta adopted him years ago, after all.

Kouta’s attitude is more than the expected depression. There appears to be resentment there too, an unprecedented amount for a child his age. Shouta will have to talk to Mandalay about it later.

Startled by the child’s vitriol themselves, his students watch him leave with varying expressions of surprise. “Well, he was rude,” Hitoshi says.

Izuku rolls his eyes under half-closed eyelids, clearly still drained. He murmurs so quietly that Shouta almost can’t hear, “Leave him alone. You were rude too when we first met, remember?” and Hitoshi blushes and tells him to shut up.

The only student that doesn’t appear appalled by Kouta’s attitude is—perhaps unsurprisingly—Bakugou, who snickers as he walks away. “He has spunk.”

Todoroki, who always seems to have a death wish when it comes to Bakugou, hums, “He acts a lot like you,” which of course causes Bakugou to lunge at him, hissing and spitting.

Shouta sighs. He had really, foolishly hoped that his students would be too exhausted to misbehave. “Stop fooling around and get your things from the bus. We have a schedule to keep.”

Shouta pulls Mandalay aside after dinner, cornering her in a room labeled 'Management Office.' As he closes the door behind him, Mandalay smirks. "My, my, Eraser, trying to get me alone?"

"We need to talk about Kouta."

At this, her teasing demeanor vanishes. "What did he do? I know he's a little... rough around the edges, but he's been through-"

"He hasn't done anything," Shouta clarifies, "but his emotional behavior is concerning. His resentment towards my students was highly inappropriate, but I'm more concerned by how unusual it is to see anger to that extent in someone his age." Shouta remembers Hitoshi, who had acted similarly, but only after years of abuse and neglect. "He's young, and children's emotions are often misguided, but they don't lash out for no reason at all. I suspect that there is additional reasoning behind Kouta's animosity."

Sighing, Mandalay sinks into the couch behind her. "His parents were heroes... They died while trying to rescue civilians from a villain two years ago. Kouta holds a lot of resentment for heroes because of it."

Shouta understands. He does. How often has he himself resented this career he has chosen, which has stolen friends from him since high school?

(Oboro was only the first.)

"I've tried explaining that his parents were heroes," Mandalay continues, "and that it's a good hero's job to put their lives on the line for people who need help. By those standards, their death was a respectable one but... but Kouta couldn't see it that way. 'My parents left me behind,' he thinks, and he's upset that society just praises their deaths and how honorable they were. He doesn't seem to like me much either, since I'm a hero. He's just too young to understand."

Kouta is too young to understand. Hell, Shouta has lived this life for thirty-one years and has been a hero himself for over half of that, but even he struggles with logic like that. That an honorable death doesn't deserve the same surge of grief and anger that he feels every time he thinks of Oboro and other friends who have perished. For Kouta, who must have been only a toddler when his parents passed, all he understands is that his parents' profession killed them, just like it had so many others. To a child in his situation, to become a hero simply means to tear families apart. To become a hero means to not only lose yourself, but to kill yourself and hurt the people you love in the

process.

“Why are you doing this to me?!” Midoriya Inko had wailed. “How am I supposed to cope, when I can lose another one of my sons at any moment?!”)

“Is he seeing anyone?” Shouta asks.

“You mean therapy? You think it’s that bad?”

“That level of animosity, especially when borne from grief and trauma, would be bad for anyone. Let alone a young child,” Shouta stresses.

Mandalay frowns, pulling off one of her paw-shaped mittens as she wrings her hands together. “I really thought that maybe he would grow out of it... that when he got older, he’d understand the nuances better, but I guess that was too much to expect. I’ve been his guardian for two years, and I still don’t know what I’m doing, do I?”

At this, Shouta lets himself smile, just a small one, although even he can tell that it’s too creepy to be much comfort. “Believe me, you’ll never know what you’re doing. Which is why you need to listen to the advice of others. Namely my advice.”

Laughing, Mandalay raises an eyebrow. “You talk like you’re a parent yourself, Eraser. You got an illegitimate child hiding around somewhere?”

Shouta stiffens. He didn’t intend for this conversation to turn to the topic of his personal life. “I really don’t think that’s any of your-” Thankfully, there’s a knock on the door, and Shouta thinks he’s been saved. At least until Problem Child 2—AKA Izuku—shoulders the door open, dragging an unconscious Kouta by his armpits, and he realizes that this new situation will probably be more troublesome than Mandalay digging into his family life.

Mandalay gasps softly and stands from the couch, gesturing for Izuku to place Kouta there. “What happened?”

“Oh, uh, he fell? I don’t know what he was doing on the fence—the one between the baths—but he fell off of it. I thought I caught him before he could hurt himself but...” Izuku gestured weakly at the unconscious boy.

“I had him posted up there in case any of you kids tried to look over

the fence,” Mandalay explains, and Shouta inwardly scoffs. If any of his students had a deviant personality like that, he would have expelled them by now. “It was probably just the shock of the fall that knocked him out. Thanks for catching him.”

For a second, Izuku only watches Kouta breathing quietly on the couch. Then he briefly glances to Shouta, consideringly, and turns to Mandalay. “Kouta doesn’t like heroes, does he?”

If the topic hadn’t been so dour, Shouta would have snorted at the resigned look on Mandalay’s face, having been confronted for the second time in less than five minutes about her nephew’s attitude. Part of Shouta is secretly proud of Izuku for noticing Kouta’s resentment and taking the initiative to address it, even if he’s unaware that Shouta had already done so.

Before Mandalay can answer, forced to reexplain the circumstances of Kouta’s family, Pixie-Bob enters holding a tray of tea. “Kouta’s parents were heroes killed on the job,” she explains for Mandalay, also unaware that this exact conversation had already occurred.

It’s clear that Izuku wants to ask more questions, so Shouta drops a hand onto his shoulder to silence him. “That’s enough, Problem Child. Time to go.” Then, noticing the flush of Izuku’s cheeks, he shifts his palm to rest on Izuku’s forehead. “Did you rehydrate yourself properly? The hot springs might seem nice but they’ll drain you if you spend too much time in them.”

Izuku squeaks and swats his hand away. “I- I’m fine!”

Shouta sighs disbelievingly and guides Izuku into the hallway to leave the Pussycats and their charge alone for the night. They’ve pestered them enough. “C’mon. You’ll need to be well-rested and hydrated for the morning, so off to bed. Hell starts tomorrow.”

This was the one week of the year Shouta wakes before sundown. Usually, at 5:30 AM he’s just finishing patrol, hoping to squeeze in a nap on the couch before ushering himself and Hitoshi to school, but today he is well-rested as the sun banks over the forest, staring down his twenty problem children who don’t look remotely ready for the hell he’s about to put them through.

“Today we will begin training to increase your strength in earnest. Our goal by the end of this is for each of you to show your worth to earn your Provisional Hero Licenses. It will also prepare you to face any hostilities you might encounter in the future. Which unfortunately is a threat that has already pushed down on you. Bakugou,” Shouta tosses him a ball, “you’ll start. Throw that.”

“Like the fitness test...”

“Correct. Your record then—without Shirakumo’s interference, that is—was 705.2 meters. To start the camp, we first need to establish a baseline of how your abilities have already improved. So, throw the ball.”

Bakugou huffs, stepping into the empty space of the clearing and winding his pitch with more dramatics than Shouta thinks is necessary. The shouted, “Go to hell!” was a bit over the top as well.

A few seconds after the ball flies out of sight, Shouta’s meter beeps. The number is about where he had expected it. “Seven-hundred-and-nine meters,” he announces, and Bakugou promptly explodes while the rest of his classmates gape in shock. It’s clear that they had all overestimated their improvement these past few months.

“I won’t deny that you have improved in certain aspects,” Shouta tells them, talking over Hitoshi’s snickering and Bakugou’s cursing, “but these improvements have mostly been restricted to the technical utilizations of your Quirks. We have done little to increase their actual power. So, starting today, you’ll be going through hell training,” Shouta lets himself grin, finally, and his students all rear back in fear. As they should. “It’ll be so hard that you’ll feel like dying, but you’ll undoubtedly be stronger by the end of it. As long as you survive, that is.”

He doesn’t waste any more time, grouping them up by Quirk type and starting them on their grueling exercises. If they had any doubts as to the difficulty of this week’s training, they’re cleared when Shouta demands Uraraka to use Zero Gravity on herself before shoving her into a rubber sphere and, with Pixie-Bob’s help, sending her careening down a newly formed mountain with only the advice of “Try not to vomit” to guide her.

Shouta hooks Kaminari up to a generator, directs Todoroki into an alternating sauna/ice-bath, and pushes Bakugou’s hands into boiling water. He pairs up Hagakure with Shouji and Kirishima with Ojiro and

tells them to go nuts, leads Asui toward the cliff-face she'll be climbing with her tongue, and sends Tokoyami into a dark cave that will surely become Dark Shadow's playground. Sero and Aoyama are instructed to use their Quirks constantly, with no breaks for pain, and Yaoyorozu and Satou are set up at a buffet where they will also be using their Quirks non-stop. Jirou and Ashido are simply told to use their Quirks to destroy some rocks with their respective Quirks while Iida does non-stop sprints and Kouda screams as loudly as he can.

It's chaotic, certainly, which is why Shouta's glad that the Pussycats are there to help. Especially Tiger, who is more than willing to randomly take a swing on one of his students, improving their reaction time to unexpected attacks.

"So, uh..." Hitoshi glances nervously around the clearing, eyeing the exhausting position of his peers, and then looks back to Izuku, "do I even want to know what you have planned for us?"

"Probably not," Shouta tells them, taking great pride when both students gulp at his devilish expression. "Pixie-Bob, if you would."

He had given her and the other Cats his plans for the students' training preemptively, so that he wouldn't need to explain the complicated structures he had envisioned to Pixie-Bob on the day-of. That would have been highly inefficient. So, Pixie-Bob takes a look at Hitoshi and Izuku, her new targets, recognizes them, and forms a tall pillar of earth stretching far into the sky. Meanwhile, Ragdoll drags two large cases of water to the side. Izuku would be dehydrating himself quickly with this exercise and would definitely be needing it.

Both students stare at the pillar with trepidation, and Shouta smirks. "You two are together."

Curiously, Hitoshi blushes, stammering and casting furtive glances to a confused Izuku. "Well, uh, not really, we just, um, I mean, I *want* to—"

Shouta mentally face-palms. "You two will be *training* together," he clarifies—although this admittedly answers some questions he'd refused to voice. Hitoshi reddens further at the misunderstanding, and Izuku also seems to have realized what Hitoshi thought Shouta had meant, because he also blushes and ducks his head from Hitoshi's gaze bashfully. Shouta really does *not* want to deal with this right now, so he continues on. "Izuku you'll be training the speed and durability of your fog, climbing to the top of this pillar as quickly as you are able,

and when you reach the top, jumping to the ground with only your Quirk to catch you. And you'll be wearing these."

On cue, Ragdoll gleefully tosses a heavy set of ankle weights to Izuku's feet before scampering off to bother another group of students. Izuku frowns, crouching to lift them experimentally and grimacing at the weight of them. Good. The training camp wasn't meant to be easy, after all.

"Meanwhile, Hitoshi will be practicing the range of his Quirk and the ability to activate it multiple times in quick succession. Izuku will be his practice subject"—admittedly because the protective father instincts in Shouta knew Izuku was the one student he could trust to not fear Hitoshi after being put under his Quirk—"and Hitoshi will attempt to brainwash him each time he reaches the top of the pillar as well as the bottom. If Pixie-Bob followed my schematics accurately, the pillar should be just higher than your current range, Hitoshi, so you'll have to reach. And you'll have to yell. Izuku, of course you're expected to respond if and when you hear Hitoshi attempt to activate his Quirk. When you manage to consecutively brainwash him from the top of the pillar consistently, Pixie-Bob will make it taller, and you'll continue to stretch your range. Which, of course, will also work to improve how well Izuku can break his fall from taller heights.

Izuku, since your Quirk won't work when you're dehydrated, you may hydrate but only when absolutely necessary. It doesn't hurt to work past your limits in a controlled environment like this, but don't pass out or anything. Hitoshi, you will continue to train even if you experience a headache or nosebleed, but as soon as it affects something drastic, like your vision, you notify either me or one of the Pussycats. Otherwise, you're expected to work through the pain. Understood?"

Fearful yet determined, his kids nod. "Yes!"

"Good. Get started, then."

Over all, Shouta is pleased with his students by the end of the day. They're rightfully exhausted as they sluggishly slave over their dinner, so he surmises that they put in as much effort as they were capable during their training, not that Shouta or the others would have

allowed them to slack off. Izuku still looks a little pale, single-mindedly guzzling the water that a burnt-handed Bakugou had passed to him, and Hitoshi still has dried blood on his upper lip from the nosebleeds caused by Quirk overuse. Perhaps a bit sadistically, Shouta takes pride in seeing the evidence of their efforts, however painful it may be.

Shouta also takes pleasure in their poor attempts of cooking their own curry, while he himself enjoys his meal catered by the Pussycats. “Your curry is burning,” he informs his nearest group of problem students blandly, and Bakugou curses and yanks Todoroki’s flaming hand out from underneath the pot just as he begins to doze off. Shouta only barely manages to hide his huff of laughter into his cup of delicious artisan coffee.

Then, he notices something else amiss. “Bakugou, Todoroki”—he waits for their eyes to focus blearily on him—“where are the other two brats?” By this, of course, he means Hitoshi and Izuku, who are suddenly absent from the gathering.

Todoroki appears confused, as if he himself only now noticed that his friends were missing, but Bakugou at least scoffs and rolls his eyes. “They fucked off into the woods a while ago. Said they were gonna track down that brat.”

“Kouta?”

Bakugou shrugs. “I don’t fucking know his name.”

Sighing, Shouta leaves them to their cooking—Todoroki is already burning their curry again, but he doesn’t inform Bakugou of this—and chugs the last of the coffee before slipping into the woods. In the muddy terrain of the forest floor, the Problem Children’s tracks are easy to find and subsequently follow. He also notices the smaller set of footprints, undoubtedly belonging to Kouta, that are only intermittently visible between stretches of rocks and tree roots, as if Kouta had attempted to avoid the soft, impressionable earth and only left prints where it was unavoidable. Wherever he has wandered off to, he likely does not want to be found.

Officially, Shouta is tracking them because he is a responsible adult in charge of these brats. Unofficially, he’s doing it because he’s curious. Kouta was cold toward his students, and that was putting it kindly. Shouta can’t picture his reaction to having his space and privacy intruded on by Hitoshi and Izuku, but he’s pretty certain that it won’t

be an appreciated gesture. However, Shouta also knows that Izuku, as troublesome as he might be, does have a knack for mediating emotional fallout and helping people understand grief and misfortune with a new perspective, so Shouta won't be intervening if the opportunity presents itself. He's too interested to see how this goes.

The footprints lead him to the base of the mountain, where a shallow incline leads upward along the cliff face. Further ahead, just out of sight, Shouta can hear the muffled voices of the Problem Children.

Rather than follow the path up the cliff, Shouta keeps to the forest and follows along the bottom of the incline until he's right beneath the voices. Then, he wraps his capture weapon around the branch of a nearby tree and climbs silently.

The foliage is thick enough that, in his dark jumpsuit concealed by shadows, he doubts the boys will be able to see him, but he can see them through the spaces of leaves. Izuku, with a bowl of poorly cooked curry outstretched like a desperate attempt at an olive branch. Hitoshi, standing further back, willing to let Izuku take the lead on this one. And Kouta, standing with his arms crossed and brow furrowed, unreceptive to this intrusion.

"...all just want to show off your Quirks," Kouta is saying. "Heroes, villains, you're all the same. You don't care who gets hurt as long as you and your Quirk look strong."

"I care if people get hurt," Izuku murmurs, softly. Behind him, Hitoshi nods in silent agreement. "And I know other heroes who care too. I'm sure your parents did, and that's why they died protecting those people."

(That's why Oboro had died, isn't it? To protect those children?)

Kouta's fists clench. "I don't care."

(The honor of Oboro's death doesn't make the grief any less bearable though.)

"You know, my brother died similarly," Izuku says, and Shouta's hands tighten around the tree branch to steady himself. "He was training to be a hero, like I am now, and he died protecting children during a villain attack. I was really young when it happened—younger than you were, I think—so I don't even remember ever meeting him. But people tell me he was a good person. And that he would've been a great hero, if he hadn't died."

Izuku raises a hand, and a dense sphere of fog settles in his palm. Kouta watches it, still appearing irritated but surprisingly attentive as tendrils of mist twine and weave around the out edges of the sphere. “We actually have—had—really similar Quirks. On the surface, there’s nothing inherently powerful or impressive about being able to conjure clouds or fog like this...” Suddenly, the sphere loses its shape, and the fog slips through Izuku’s fingers like viscous sand. It pools at his feet, forcing Kouta to step back from the chilly mist as it licks at his ankles. “When I first got my Quirk, it was just like this. Thin. Weak. It can’t support anything like this. It’s just *there*.” Izuku kicks at it, and the fog dissipates like it was never even there at all.

“For it to be useful, my Quirk needed to be stronger. That’s why I train it.” When the fog returns, it’s a solid block at Izuku’s feet. He kicks at it, and his shoe doesn’t pass through. He steps on it, and it supports his weight. “Now my Quirk is strong. My fog is dense enough to support me and to support *others*, which to me, is more important. You said that we’re all focused on making our Quirks stronger, and you’re right. But we aren’t doing it for ourselves. It’s not a competition, at least not to us. We just want to help people, and I know my brother did too. *That’s* why he died.”

Kouta is silent for a moment, frowning with his eyes transfixed on Izuku’s thick cloud of mist below his feet. Finally, he scoffs and looks away. “Aren’t you mad at him? Aren’t you mad that someone you loved left you behind just to save some stranger?”

(“Yes,” Shouta wants to say.)

“No,” Izuku says. “Upset, maybe, that I never got to actually meet my brother. But not mad.”

“What do you know?!” From his position in the tree, Shouta can only barely see the tears building along Kouta’s eyelids, glittering delicately in the soft light of the moon. “If you never even met him, then you can’t compare.”

Sighing, Izuku lets the block of fog roll out from under him, and his feet fall back to the ground. “You’re right. I didn’t mean to imply our situations were the same... I’m sorry.”

Hitoshi, who so far hasn’t intruded on the conversation, steps closer. “My dad’s a hero. I don’t... I don’t know what I would do if I lost him like you lost your parents.”

(Is Shouta making a mistake? Will he inevitably do to Hitoshi what

Oboro had done to him? Leave him behind, bitter and resentful of the world and the heroes in it?)

Hitoshi, completely unaware of Shouta's presence nearby, continues, "But I do know that I would never blame him or hate him. After all, I know that he'd never purposely put himself in a situation where he definitely knows that he won't come home. He's too logical for that. So, even if he were to... to die, I'd know that he never intended to leave me on purpose. No matter how hopeless a fight may seem, he'd still try his hardest to be safe in the end if only for my sake. I'm sure that if your parents are anything like my dad, then it was the same for them."

Kouta scoffs and looks away from them, unknowingly turning his face to Shouta so he can see tears fall to the earth. "Go away," he begs, so quiet and broken that Shouta only knows his words from the shape of his lips.

Hitoshi, likely realizing that his words have only upset Kouta, sends a panicked glance to Izuku, who looks just as unsure about the situation. Apparently with no other ideas, Izuku sets the bowl of curry down on the ground. "We're sorry for overstepping, Kouta. It's not any of our business, is it? We'll just leave the food here for you... I know you said you were fine, but it's there, uh, just in case."

Kouta says nothing, so Izuku grabs Hitoshi by the hand and leads him back down the mountain, disappearing from Shouta's line of sight.

Shouta remains in his tree, unable to justify leaving an upset child alone in the woods, and just watches. Finally, when Kouta's tears turn dry, the child turns back to the bowl of curry, considering it. Then, he picks it up and begins to eat.

Shouta takes that as his cue to leave.

The third day of the camp goes about the same as the first. Shouta continues putting his kids through their hellish training and watches in pride when they manage to do better than the day before despite the remnants of exhaustion. Their success leads the Pussycats to convince Shouta and Vlad to give the students a reward instead of additional training that evening. They agree to let the Pussycats let

their kids run through their ‘test of courage,’ but only with the stipulation that the students requiring remedial training attend additional lessons while everyone else plays their games.

Shouta feels a little bad about this decision, though, when he has to pull Todoroki and Izuku from their friends. They were obviously looking forward to the little game, with Hitoshi and Izuku laughing excitedly and Bakugou and Todoroki huddled together to talk strategy. So, they’re both understandably disappointed when Shouta announces to the remedial students that they actually won’t be participating. Luckily, neither of them are as vocal about their disappointment as Mina and Kaminari, who wail loudly until Shouta wraps them in his capture weapon to silence them. With nothing more than a forlorn look, Izuku and Todoroki follow behind Shouta silently as he leads them away.

Kirishima cocks his head at them as they walk. “Wait, you guys have to do remedial classes too?”

Todoroki and Izuku glance at each other. “We failed,” Todoroki offers.

“Well, yeah, I guess, but you guys were totally manly during your exam! If even that wasn’t enough, then all of us would’ve lost against All Might.”

Shouta silently agrees, but the damage had been done. They failed their exam, and now they need to attend remedial courses with the others. Shouta can’t allow himself to play favorites, after all, no matter how badly he may want to exempt them from these undeserved lessons.

So, he leads them and the rest of his Problem Children like leashed dogs to the classroom, where Vlad and one of his students are already waiting. The student, who Shouta vaguely recognizes as Monoma Neito from the Sports Festival, gasps exaggeratedly at 1-A’s arrival. “No way! Seven students from the great 1-A failed the exam? Aren’t you guys supposed to be better than 1-B?”

Shouta rolls his eyes. While 1-A and 1-B had the same exam in theory, Shouta knows that Vlad wasn’t outright searching to expose his students’ weaknesses like Shouta had been. Also, none of their students had fought against All Might. Luckily, even Shouta’s students seem to recognize that Monoma’s taunts hold no real weight, and they all ignore him with little more than weary sighs or, in Izuku’s case, a look of curious concern.

Shouta and Vlad will need to find a way to get Monoma to work together with the 1-A students and maybe even get over his apparent inferiority complex in the process. They'd already been planning some exercises requiring teamwork between the students, but they'll likely need to add some incentive if-

A sharp buzzing sensation passes through Shouta's skull, and he stiffens. Mandalay? She wouldn't use her Quirk, though, unless something urgent had come up. Maybe a student had become injured? Some kind of altercation that required Shouta or Vlad's interference? Or something worse?

(Is someone dead?)

"Quiet," he commands, when his students chatter blithely rather than listening intently. Only Izuku seems to share Shouta's apprehension, the both of them making brief, alarmed eye contact as they wait for Mandalay's message to come through.

"We're being attacked by two villains," Mandalay relays, and Shouta's chest grows cold. "There may be more. Anyone who can get to camp safely should do so immediately. Do not engage the enemy!"

No, no, this is wrong. They'd changed the location of the camp. How could they have found them here, despite that?

Mind racing, Shouta looks over at his kids, at Izuku who is already on his feet ready to do something. He has to protect them. To keep them safe. *He's* responsible for them. It's just like the USJ. Once again, Shouta is utterly alone with the lives of children depending on him and with no chance for reinforcements.

("You're the only one that can protect everyone!")

He has other kids out there, in the forest, alone with the villains. He has to help them. Even if that meant leaving these kids here where he couldn't help *them*.

But Vlad is here, isn't he? He can protect his students when Shouta can't. Right?

("You're the only one...")

"Vlad, I'm leaving them with you."

With a final glare to Izuku, which manages to convey the message of

‘sit back down and don’t move, Problem Child,’ Shouta races from the classroom at breakneck speed, flying down the hallway and through the double doors leading outside. In the dark of the night, the forest writhes with a dark, dense smoke alight with ashes.

His students were out there, trapped in that smoke. How many has he lost already? How many has he failed?

A sudden voice to his left chuckles. “Worried, Eraser? You should be.”

And his vision erupts with blue flame.

Chapter End Notes

once again, it'll probably be two weeks before the next update.
Sorry to disappoint guys!

good news (maybe?) is that i made a discord! here's the link if you'd like to join and scream about how mean I am for making you wait for another chapter: <https://discord.gg/u2Zb2vVz>

next time: more training camp arc! (duh)

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The facsimile of a person grins, as his tissue paper skin turns viscous. “How important are your students to you? I hope you can protect them till your dying breath.”

Chapter Notes

muscular is the most boring villain to write i swear to god

enjoy :)

It is instinct alone that allows Shouta to dodge the blast of fire, but the scorching heat still brushes at his face, and he’s forced to close his eyes against the onslaught. He clings to the wall of the school building and waits for the heat to pass. When it finally does, he looks down to his attacker, Erasure already activated.

The boy—because really, he looks so *young*, perhaps an adult but even then, only in name—is heavily scarred. Staples seem to be the only thing keeping burnt, flaking flesh attached to the undamaged parts of himself, and Shouta winces internally. He’s seen some heavy scars in his line of work, but this stitched-together patchwork of skin, on someone so young who should never have experienced pain like that...

It’s almost sickening.

The attacker cocks his head to the side when he notices Shouta dodged his flames, and he smirks. The skin of his lower lip creases like tissue paper when he does so, and Shouta is briefly concerned that it’ll tear. “You really are a pro, huh?” And he turns his palm to Shouta’s new position.

No fire pours from his hands.

Shouta takes the opportunity of the villain’s confusion to lunge from the building, looping his capture weapon around his opponent’s neck, and using the leverage and momentum of gravity to yank them together. His knee collides with the other’s face, and they collapse to the ground, with Shouta pinning the villain into the dirt.

“You’ll tell me why you’re here,” he growls, shifting so the villain’s neck is twisted uncomfortably, “how many of you there are, and what

exactly you're planning."

Despite his unfavorable position, the villain only laughed. "You sound pretty desperate there. What's got you so wound up?"

An explosion and a flash of light bursts from the forest. Distantly, Shouta can hear the sound of shouting.

(Has he lost anyone yet?)

He tightens his capture weapon around the villain's neck. "Talk," he commands.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't," Shouta growls, readjusting his grip so he holds the villain's arm behind his back, "I'll do *this*."

He feels the ulna snap beneath skin, and the villain hisses.

At the same time, another message runs through Shouta's head. "*If anyone has seen Kouta, I don't know where he is. Help him get home safe!*"

Another burst of smoke rises in the distant forest, and Shouta's heart thrums.

(His kids are out there. *Hitoshi* is out there.)

"I'll break your right arm next," he promises. His mind, on its own accord, flashes through endless possibilities for injury, all happening to his student's and son. His grip tightens on the villain's broken arm. "We'll do this logically, and I'll save your legs for last."

Still, the villain manages to laugh. "You seem like you're in a hurry..."

"Sensei!"

Shouta turns his head, and Koda, Iida, and Ojiro burst from the trees.

(Unharmed, they look unharmed. They're alive.)

While he's briefly distracted, the villain rolls out from under him, and Shouta jumps away to put distance between them, Erasure activated in case he plans to attack with his Quirk.

But instead of attacking, he only stands up straight with his back still to Shouta. "I guess this was to be expected of a UA teacher... Say,

Hero...

And then he *melts*.

Futilely, Shouta tugs on his capture weapon, but it passes through the villain like hot wax as his body loses form and drips to the ground. Was the fire not his Quirk? Was something else at play here?

The facsimile of a person grins, as his tissue paper skin turns viscous. “How important are your students to you? I hope you can protect them till your dying breath.”

(“You’re the only one that can protect them!”)

And the villain is gone, reduced to nothing more than a puddle spread across the dirt.

Shouta doesn’t pause. He can’t. There are still kids in the forest—his kids—that need his help.

(“You’re the only one.”)

He dashes into the forest.

He passes the small group of students as he goes, already running desperately for his protection, but there’s more out there, and he can only shout, “Get inside with the others!” As he leaves them behind.

Mandalay had said Kouta is missing. And Shouta knows where he is. And Hitoshi knows too.

Odds are, his son is already attempting his own rescue of Kouta. Shouta knows that that’s where he will be, deep in the forest on that isolated mountain, alone with only a young, disillusioned child and no chance of any other rescue.

Shouta can’t waste time.

(the only one, the only one, the only-)

He hears the fight before he sees it, the explosions and the sounds of demolished rock. When he can finally see the cliff-face, he latches his capture weapon around a nearby branch and swings himself onto the mountainside, running up the slope as soon as his feet hit the ground.

There’s a crash, and the stone begins to crack beneath Shouta’s feet. When the dust settles, he sees Bakugou, snarling with fists alight. He

sees Kouta, trembling and teary. He sees Hitoshi, shielding Kouta with his own body.

(alive, alive, they're alive)

And he sees a behemoth of a man. One side of his face is torn and damaged, and a metal prosthetic has replaced his right eye. When he throws a punch, aimed for Bakugou's chest, pink strands of flesh wrap around the meat of his arm, thickening it as it makes impact with the solid mountain.

Bakugou dodges it easily, soaring into the air and releasing a set of timely explosions into the villain's face before surging away. Hitoshi stumbles backwards, with Kouta still tucked firmly behind him, to dodge the downpour of rocks streaming from the collision point.

Shouta is there in the next instant, scarf flying and Erasure activated, as the villain aims another hit. With the exposed tendons of muscles suddenly receding, he stumbles and misses his targets—Hitoshi and Kouta—completely. For a brief moment, all three boys and the villain pause in apparent surprise of the sudden absence of his Quirk.

With him standing stock-still, it's easy for Shouta's scarf to loop tightly around the man's broad chest, closing the distance between them so Shouta can plant one hand behind the villain's head and shove him forcefully into the rocky terrain.

Even without his Quirk, the villain is too large and too strong to effectively pin, even if Shouta managed a good crack to his skull, and he tosses him off of him easily. Shouta takes the motion gracefully, landing a few meters away so that he's between him and the children. Never taking his gaze from the villain, he grunts, "Who's hurt?"

"Bakugou got hit by Muscular," Hitoshi tells him, nodding his head to the brawny villain and ignoring Bakugou's subsequent growl that he was fine, "and another villain cut my arm with his teeth earlier? But we took care of him already. I think other than some bruises and small cuts, we're all okay, though."

(He did it, he did it, he made it in time, they're okay)

"Good." He knows his panicked, desperate relief is probably obvious to Hitoshi, and not reassuring, but Shouta can't bring himself to mind right now. "You get back to the camp. Take Kouta with you. Just leave the villain to me."

Muscular, though, laughs, rolling his shoulders back to crack his neck. “Now that’s something a real hero would say. But I thought the others were supposed to keep you pros out of our way? Huh, I guess this will just make this more of a challenge, won’t it?” He clenches a fist and surges forward, attacking even when Shouta Erases his Quirk again. “That one kid’s on our list, so I can’t let him run off. And the others...”

Paired against a massive, strong opponent like this, Shouta can only dodge the assault. Looking behind him, he is thankful to see that Bakugou had slammed into Hitoshi and Kouta to knock them out of Muscular’s destructive path, rolling away in a heap of tangled limbs. Still, Muscular doesn’t seem too perturbed, and when Shouta glances away to check on the kids, his muscles once again protrude from his flesh, and he cracks a strong, powerful punch into the rock just below Shouta’s feet. Shouta only barely dodges in time.

“Well, it’s been a while since I’ve had the chance to kill someone, so I won’t be letting the opportunity pass.”

Shouta reactivates his Quirk, grimacing when he feels the beginning pain of Quirk Exhaustion forming in the space behind his eyes. Apparently now more prepared for the effects of Erasure, Muscular doesn’t falter in his next punch, but his power and speed seem to be drastically reduced without the additional bulk to his muscles. Shouta jumps up and over the fist aiming for his chest, and then uses it as a springboard to launch himself toward the villain, landing a solid hit between his knee and Muscular’s face. He plants his palm on the top of his head and pivots so he is situated behind Muscular with his shins resting on his shoulders. His capture weapon wraps tightly around Muscular’s biceps and chest and tightens to restrain him.

“What *list*?” he growls. From the corner of his eye, he watches Bakugou climb to his feet. Hitoshi and Kouta remain splayed across the ground. He can’t see their faces but hopes that he isn’t imagining the visible rise and fall of their chests.

(dead, dead, dying, his kids are dying)

Bakugou positions himself to stand above them, hands curled into claws, ready to fight. Shouta notices him eyeing the slope back down to the forest, to freedom, but he would need to pass Muscular to escape. With Hitoshi and Kouta as defenseless dead-weight—*(dead, dead, dead)*—he logically decides to stay put for now.

Shouta keeps his gaze fixed on Muscular, but his eyes are beginning to

burn with the strain. He tightens his capture weapon further. “*What list?*”

“We wouldn’t have come without any kind of objective.” Shouta can’t see Muscular’s face from his angle, but he can sense the smirk there. “Say, maybe you can help. I found the Shinsou kid already, but maybe you can tell me where the one called Shirakumo is?”

They want Hitoshi. They want Izuku.

(They want his kids.)

Shouta blinks.

There is the sound of ripping fabric, and just as Shouta begins to open his eyes, a fist slams into his nose, and he’s knocked back into the side of the mountain. He swears he can hear the snap of his skull and bright white briefly overtakes his vision. When he manages to focus, only barely, Muscular is already aiming another punch for his face.

At the last moment, before even Shouta can form a coherent thought to move, light explodes like a flashbang, and he reflexively turns his face away to shield his eyes.

No impact comes.

This time, when his vision returns, he forces himself to force the vague shapes of colors to form something coherent and tangible. He finds Muscular, standing with the scattered remnants of Shouta’s capture weapon around him. Hitoshi, further up the slope, has somehow managed to make it back on his feet, although he wobbles as he positions himself in front of Kouta protectively. And Bakugou is flying erratically around Muscular’s head, popping explosions and narrowly dodging every punch thrown his way.

“Just let me hit you, kid! I wanna see some blood!”

Shouta shakes his head out, foolishly thinking it would clear the pounding in his skull. Instead the pressure in his eyes only increases, and when his vision refocuses, he notices how his goggles have crumbled into pieces, now hanging haphazardly around his neck.

(“How about I lend you my goggles?”)

A crack of an explosion, and a sizzle and a pop, and Bakugou suddenly careens to the side. His Quirk must be exhausted, sporadically failing

to keep him upright and airborne. Muscular swats him away like an annoying bug. “I’m getting tired of this. You’re not even one of the targets, boy,” he grunts and stalks toward Hitoshi and Kouta.

Bakugou lands clumsily further down the slope. Blood drips from his mouth, and more runs like a river from his temple, but he’s standing. If he wanted, he could run and save himself, leaving Shouta, Hitoshi, and Kouta to fend for themselves.

Shouta knows that he won’t.

Finally, when he can convince his limbs to obey his commands, Shouta levers himself to his feet. As he rises, crumbling pebbles of the rockface he collided with fall around him. With enough force, Muscular could probably bring the whole mountain down on top of them.

Shouta’s head pounds once, twice, before he rallies himself to work through the pain. Muscular is advancing on Hitoshi, sneering and saying something that the ringing in Shouta’s ears can’t interpret.

Hitoshi’s lips move, but Muscular must not respond, because he keeps stalking forward cockily, as Hitoshi and Kouta attempt to shuffle back. They have nowhere else to run.

Muscular’s mistake was turning his back to Shouta. His mistake was thinking Shouta would willingly stay down.

When Shouta darts forward, all he feels is pain. It explodes in his skull, blooms from his chest, and runs down his left leg. He refuses to let it hinder him. Not now.

(“—the only—“)

He Erases Muscular’s Quirk for a second, and a second only, before his head implodes and his eyes sting from the smoke, but it’s enough to get that protective wall of muscle to recede. It’s enough for Shouta to launch into the air and bring his right leg crashing into the side of Muscular’s neck. Muscular staggers, coughing as his windpipe is crushed, and is thrown into the side of the mountain.

Shouta isn’t strong enough to have caused much damage, but that hadn’t quite been his intent. He just needs to be a distraction. And he needs Muscular to take this fight seriously. He needs him to punch harder, with more power, like Shouta knows he can. It’s the only way he, and his kids, can make it out alive.

“Go,” he commands, watching as Muscular straightens himself.

“Dad-” Hitoshi starts, but Shouta doesn’t hear Hitoshi or Kouta move, *and he needs them to move*, so he yells, “Go, Hitoshi! Now!”

Thankfully, he hears their off-kilter footsteps following his command. Good. He needs them out of the way. He needs them safe.

When Muscular rights himself, he cackles and reaches into his pocket. Shouta is immediately on edge, expecting some sort of weapon, but instead he pulls something plastic and oblong which he places over his eye. “That was fun, but like I said, I was only playing. But if you’re gonna hit like that, then I’ll take it seriously from here.”

Good, Shouta thinks and prepares himself for Muscular’s attack.

As expected, he aims another hit for Shouta, but this time, Shouta can’t afford to use Erasure to slow the impact—not when his head is already pounding and his eyes are stinging from the smoke of the forest fire, and he doesn’t know how many more times he can use his Quirk before knocking himself unconscious from the pain.

Somehow, Shouta manages to dodge the punch. He notices blackened scorch marks spotting the exposed muscle and realizes Bakugou must have managed to do more damage than Shouta had expected of him. Maybe that’s affecting Muscular’s speed and power, negating the augmentation of his Quirk.

Either way, Shouta is thankful as he watches the ledge he had been standing on crumble into pieces under Muscular’s fist. Hopefully, though, Muscular still had enough power in his punch for Shouta’s plan to play out.

Turning away from his destruction, Muscular sighs. “Can’t use your Quirk anymore, hero? That’s disappointing. Oh well, I guess you just weren’t a worthy opponent after all.” Somehow, his muscles thicken impossibly larger until he is more flesh than man. Shouta realizes with an empty chill that, if he’s just a little too slow, he might not make it out of this.

(Not that it matters, so long as his kids *do*.)

Muscular continues to wrap himself in meaty flesh, and Shouta shifts so that he is positioned in front of the concave dent where he had impacted the rockface earlier. Even just the vibrations of stepping near it jostles some rocks and debris loose from the mountain, and

they topple against Shouta's feet.

He just needs...

There.

When Muscular's fist bears down, Shouta lets it come.

And, apparently with all the extra muscle wrapped around his arm, it comes much faster than Shouta's prepared for. He manages to avoid the brunt of the hit, but the edge of a high-powered fist scrapes against his side as it passes, and his chest explodes with further pain.

Then, Muscular's arm impacts the unstable section of rock behind him, and the mountain *explodes*.

The thing is, Shouta had noticed a few things about Muscular. His Quirk, some kind of muscle augmentation, clearly made him faster, stronger, and hardier than he would've been otherwise. But sometimes, such immense power can act as a drawback. Every time Muscular threw a punch, he put the entire weight of his massive body behind it. This obviously amped the damage done by his attacks, but it also threw his body off-balance through the entirety of the motion. Without fail, Muscular had slowed after each of his punches, having to reorient his body into a suitable position for another attack. It was also incredibly likely that, once he began, Muscular was forced to follow through with each punch until completion. He couldn't stop or redirect himself mid-swing.

Which means two things:

- 1) Muscular was forced to hit the mountain side just as forcefully as he had intended to hit Shouta, with nothing to cushion the blow.
- 2) When the mountain subsequently began to collapse on top of him, Muscular is too slow to move out of the way.

Unfortunately, with his freshly cracked ribs, injured leg, and pounding head as he forces himself to painfully activate his Quirk, Shouta might not be able to move out of the way either.

"Dad!"

("He'd still try his hardest to be safe in the end if only for my sake.")

He has to try.

“Dad! Move!”

It's not a Quirked command. It can't be. Not when Shouta didn't respond to Hitoshi in the first place, eyes aching as he cancelled Muscular's Quirk so he couldn't feasibly protect himself from the landslide. Still, Shouta feels like he's been Brainwashed, like Hitoshi's words are guiding his feet to pedal backwards away, away, away from the falling debris.

He won't be fast enough. He has to move backwards so his gaze stays trained on Muscular. He can't let himself blink. His left leg threatens to buckle with every clumsy step. His ribs rattle with each breath. His eyes sting with the strain of his Quirk and with the bits of debris, but he can't blink.

(“I don't know what I'd do if I lost him.”)

And then, as large piles of rock and rubble fall and obscure Muscular from sight, when he can't do anything else, he feels a hand grasp the back of his jumpsuit and a sudden blast of heat with a burst of light by his hip, and he's quickly propelled back, back, back, until he's clear of the careening debris.

Muscular, though, is left to be buried.

Shouta briefly processes a frantic puff of air—a gasp of relief—and then Hitoshi is plastered to his side. Somehow, Shouta doesn't mind the pain flaring in his ribs as he embraces his son.

“I'm okay,” he promises, despite his injuries screaming otherwise. He looks over Hitoshi. Then, Kouta. Then, Bakugou. “You're all okay,” he reassures himself. Because they are. They're bloodied and a little bruised, but they're breathing.

(alive, alive, alive, for now)

The forest is still on fire.

The villains are still here.

His kids are still in danger.

“We have to go,” Shouta tells them, and the kids all nod in quiet understanding. Hitoshi, the least injured of them all, shoulders Kouta onto his back, and Shouta ignores the pain in his leg as he lets adrenaline carry him down the mountain and through the forest.

“You two.” Hitoshi and Bakugou both glance at him. He’s slowing them down, he knows it, but, “Don’t you *dare* leave my sight.”

Bakugou scoffs, but they both seem to listen. They don’t leave him behind.

Shouta needs to get them back to the facility. Hopefully, by now, the Pussycats have gotten the rest of the students to safety. But if the villains are after Hitoshi and Izuku, if they’re the targets, then Shouta needs to be with them. Both of them. He needs them nearby, where he can keep them safe. He can’t lose his kids.

(only one, only one, only one)

But suddenly, there is a blur of yellow, and Hitoshi, Kouta, and Bakugou disappear.

There is a moment where Shouta think his eyesight must have failed him. They were right there, in front of him, and now the forest is completely empty, and that’s *wrong*. But Shouta hears a cackling laugh above him, and he whips his head upwards. There’s a man, balancing delicately on the exposed branch of a tree and leaning on a cane. He wears a mask, a top hat and bright yellow coat. In his hand, he swirls one, two, three, marbles between his fingers.

(gone, gone, he took them)

Instinct drives Shouta to reach for his capture weapon, but there’s nothing there, its remains scattered under the landslide of the mountain. He can do nothing, but stare up from below.

“Sorry for the surprise,” the man croons. He slips the marbles into his pocket, out of sight. Then, he raises his hand to his ear to supposedly talk into a comm. “I’ve got the Brainwashing one... and a couple of tag-alongs. Figured they might be useful. I say let’s forget the Kurogiri knock-off and make our retreat, hmm? Meet at the rendezvous.” And, looking back at Eraser, he bows. “Shame to leave so soon, but I’m just not much of a fighter. Ta-ta!”

As if made of helium, he leaps into the sky and floats away.

Shouta has no way of reaching him. Not with a lame leg and without his capture weapon for mobility. But that doesn’t mean he’ll let him out of his sight. Not when the villain has Hitoshi and the others.

(only one)

Shouta takes a step and then another, trying his damndest to run despite that piercing pain in his leg. The villain is fast, already disappearing into the distance. He's getting away, and Shouta is too slow.

Two figures suddenly to pass by him, quicker than he can move.

A wall—no, a wave of ice explodes outward from Shouta's position, stretching far into the sky and further into the forest, nearly reaching as far to run the villain through despite the distance. He only barely manages to dodge it, laughing in delighted surprise as he tilts his body around the sharp points of the glacier. And then there's another shape, a student rising up the side of the ice with small footholds of fog to aid his ascent. He's dashing, almost impossibly quick, undoubtedly driven by breathless desperation to not be curbed by normal human limitation.

When he reaches the end of his icy mountain, Shirakumo Izuku vaults off the edge, and Shouta *yells*.

Izuku and the villain collide, and fall out of sight. Todoroki, puffing visibly chilled breaths, glances to Shouta. "Sensei. You're injured. Let us take care of them."

And he skates away, leaving Shouta—injured and slow and *useless*—behind.

("Will you just watch as this life destroys him too?")

No. He has to move.

This time, when he runs, he feels no pain. Logically, Shouta knows that most of his ribs are undeniably broken, something in his leg probably is as well, and his head pounds with not only Quirk strain but likely a concussion too. Despite the adrenaline negating his awareness of these injuries, this will only serve to damage himself further.

But he just can't just do nothing. Not when Hitoshi, and Izuku, and everyone else needs him to be a hero.

(he's the only one)

Shouta runs.

Following the path of Todoroki's ice finally leads him to a large

clearing. There, a group of villains, most unfamiliar, stand across from a slightly singed Izuku and frosty Todoroki. Shouta aches to rush forward and *help*, but even in his adrenaline-fueled state, he knows that would be unwise. The villains still have hostages, after all, and Shouta honestly doubts he could make a clean getaway with Izuku and Todoroki in tow right now.

For once in Shouta's life, instinct wins over reason.

He shoves between Todoroki and Izuku to position himself in front of them. He knows that he's visibly injured, exhausted, and weak, and he isn't enough to intimidate the villains like this, but if they want to take more of his kids, then they'll have to go through him.

The scarred villain—somehow the same one from before despite Shouta watching him turn to mush—raises his eyebrows, almost leisurely, at his appearance, and the school-girl with her hair in buns tilts her head like a curious cat. Another man, this one covered head-to-toe in a body suit, gasps. "He's defending his students even now? How brave! *How pathetic!*"

There's a glow of blue light, off to their left where a burnt crater caves into the dirt. The man in the yellow coat appears, brushing himself off as he strolls casually over to the rest of the villains.

"Sensei," Izuku whispers, "Compress, he can condense things into small marbles. That's what happened to the others."

"They're in his pocket," Todoroki adds. "He keeps fumbling with things in there."

Shouta shakes his head. He knows very little of this villain, but while he seems arrogant, he also seems to take pride in tricks. "Then they're not in his pocket. If he were smart, he wouldn't make it so obvious."

Compress laughs. "You're smarter than I gave you credit for! But you still don't know where they are, do you? Not much help to know where they aren't!"

Suddenly, Izuku freezes behind him, and Shouta watches him whip his head to the side. "Sensei—"

The air feels colder, like the heat is being sucked away. A cloud of pitch black darkness appears, right where Izuku had turned his attention. Shouta immediately recognizes it as the Quirk of Kurogiri, from the USJ, and his breath catches. Now, the villains have a means

of escape. If Shouta lets them, they can disappear with his kids in their grasp, and Shouta wouldn't be able to follow.

He pushes Izuku and Todoroki just a little further behind himself.

"Dabi," the warp gate speaks, and Shouta realizes that the manifestation of the Quirk is Kurogiri himself, massive and writhing and so very cold. "It's time for us to go." Smaller portals of mist appear behind each of the villains, unacceptably close. They can reach them too quickly, and a couple villains are already disappearing through them.

The scarred one, Dabi, frowns. "Wait. Our goal isn't complete. Our other target is right here, isn't he? Let's just grab him."

"Allow me," Kurogiri offers.

Suddenly, Shouta's feet go cold, and he looks down, expecting himself, or Izuku, to already be falling through a portal to who knows where. Instead, the ground is coated with a layer of thick, green fog, when Shouta looks, he sees that more of it covers the last remaining portal, the one positioned behind Dabi and Compress, to block their escape.

"Oh so you can prevent Kurogiri's Quirk with your own, huh? No wonder Shigaraki and the boss want you, then." Dabi turns to Compress. "You'll need to take care of him, so he can't stop us from getting out of here."

"Easy. Just give me an opening."

For the second time in one night, Shouta's vision erupts into blue flame.

He Erases the Quirk, and it only lasts for a short second with the pain cutting through his eyes, but it's enough time for Todoroki to form a barrier of ice between them and the fire. It melts immediately.

All three of them dive out of the way as more fire races toward them.

"Todoroki Shouto," Dabi croons. "What was all your training for if you can't even beat me?"

This time, when Shouta sees a flash of yellow, dangerously close to Izuku, he doesn't hesitate to lunge for it. He snags Compress around the waist just as he brushes his fingertips against an unsuspecting Izuku's shoulder. Izuku disappears into nothing before Compress hits

the ground.

(gone, gone, gone forever)

He'll get him back.

Quickly, Shouta shifts so Compress's hands, which had moved to protectively cover his head as he fell, are pinned at his sides and pinches him at the base of the neck until he feels Compress's shoulders go limp, unconscious. With Dabi busy tauntingly fighting Todoroki, and Kurogiri apparently content to let the scene unfold without interference, Shouta searches.

There's a marble loosely clenched between Compress's fingers—*Izuku*—and a couple more in his pockets, which he concludes are probably duds, but he takes them anyways. When Shouta removes his mask, three damp marbles tumble from between Compress's lips. Stored in a place like that, it has to be the kids.

"Sensei!"

Shouta tries to propel himself backwards, but the ground has suddenly vanished from under him. Compress's unconscious body falls through a warp-gate, and Shouta begins to fall with it, only to be stopped by a small surge of ice wrapping around his arm to hold him in place. Todoroki appears just a second after and helps to haul him out of the portal.

Compress reappears a few meters away, landing beside Dabi with a heavy thud. Dabi, meanwhile, looks at them and the marbles tucked protectively in Shouta's grip. Then, Dabi grins.

(no, no, no)

He removes the hat from Compress's body and removes his hat, holding it upside down as he reaches his hand in.

Then, he pulls out a marble.

"Who do you have there, Eraser?"

Immediately, Shouta activates his Quirk. The marbles glow, and then the air around him is displaced as bodies and objects appear in thin air. From Dabi's grasp, just on the outskirts of Shouta's sight, his marble glows too.

From Shouta's hands, a few blocks of ice fall heavily to the ground. Then, Bakugou. Kouta. Tokoyami. All disoriented and collapsing to the ground.

That's it.

(no Izuku, no Hitoshi)

Breath caught, Shouta watches as Hitoshi appears in Dabi's grasp, forced to hold his head up where Dabi clutches him beneath the chin.

"Pretty sure we got the other guy in here too." Dabi shakes the top hat, and even from this distance, Shouta can hear the rattling of another marble.

(no, no)

"Let's go, Kurogiri."

Shouta is running before he can fully process the decision. A portal is forming behind Dabi, and Hitoshi is being dragged into it. He is reaching, and Hitoshi is right there, but too far. He is going to run straight through the portal and end up wherever the villains are going, but that's okay, because then Hitoshi won't be alone, and Shouta can help.

Shouta is injured and almost definitely no match for whatever lies on the other side of this portal, but *he can help*.

(only one, only one, only one who can protect them)

"Why?" Hitoshi asks.

It's a desperate attempt for Dabi to fall under Brainwashing, Shouta knows. But Dabi says nothing, and continues pulling Shouta's son through the portal.

"Hitoshi," Shouta gasps

And then, he falls under Brainwashing.

Somewhere, distantly in the back of his mind, Shouta realizes that the question hadn't been aimed at Dabi after all. But it was too late to avoid the Quirk now.

"Dad," Hitoshi croaks, just as his neck sinks into the portal and only his exhausted, bloodied face is visible.

“Dad, stop,” he commands.

Shouta does.

Hitoshi disappears.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

June 29, 20XX, approx. 2130: UA training camp (Loc. UNDISCLOSED) infiltrated by individuals suspected of involvement with the League of Villains (LOV). Pro-Heroes Eraserhead, Vlad King, Wild Wild Pussycats (WWP) on-site. 41 civilians on-site. 31 civilians with minor injuries. 1 civilian (Shouji Mezou, 15) critically injured. 2 civilians (Shinsou Hitoshi, 15; Shirakumo Izuku, 15) missing. 1 hero (Eraserhead) critically injured.

From witness testimony, civilians Shirakumo and Shinsou believed to be intended targets of the attack.

Chapter Notes

TW: panic attack. occurs throughout the first section of this chapter, from the beginning of the chapter to the line break.

a good portion of this chapter is formatted as the incident report regarding the training camp. I played around with the formatting a bit, and hopefully it's clear and understandable. I just thought this was a better mode of providing information efficiently, especially regarding some changes to canon, rather than Shouta asking a shit ton of questions leading to some long-winded dialogue. Some terminology that might need clarification:

UID - unidentified

ID - identified (followed by identification)

UNK - unknown (used to denote Quirks that aren't technically identified)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[REPORT BEGINS]

June 29, 20XX, approx. 2130: UA training camp (Loc. UNDISCLOSED) infiltrated by individuals suspected of involvement with the League of Villains (LOV). Pro-Heroes Eraserhead, Vlad King, Wild Wild Pussycats (WWP) on-site. 41 civilians on-site. 31 civilians with minor injuries. 1 civilian (Shouji Mezou, 15) critically injured. 2 civilians (Shinsou Hitoshi, 15; Shirakumo Izuku, 15) missing. 1 hero (Eraserhead) critically injured.

From witness testimony, civilians Shirakumo and Shinsou believed to be intended targets of the attack.

When Shouta wakes, he is safe.

He knows this, because Hizashi is slumped in a plastic chair beside his bed. He is dressed in civilian gear, and he is asleep.

Evidently, Shouta is in the hospital. His body aches worse than it did after the USJ, and it looks like he's been wrapped in twice as many bandages. A padded cushion elevates his left leg beneath his calf, which has been wrapped in plaster and pierced by the needle-like wires of a circular, metallic brace. When Shouta experimentally flexes his toes, a zing of excruciating pain fires. He can feel the taut pull of the wires beneath his skin, and he grimaces.

If this is how injured he is, then he doesn't want to imagine his kids-

His kids.

("Dad. Stop.")

Hitoshi. Izuku.

Where are his kids?

He lost them. Shouta lost them. He lost them, and they're gone. They're with the League. His kids are with the League. They're with the League, and Shouta needs to leave now. He needs to find them.

("You're the only one who can protect them!")

He couldn't protect them. He failed. He needs to go.

Hands clamp down over Shouta's wrists. He tries to wrench himself away but is too weak to escape the grip which forces his body down, back into the bed. He hadn't even been fully aware that he had stood, but he can't lay back down. Not when his kids are out there, alone, where Shouta can't protect them.

He's too weak.

“Shou! Shou!”

Eyes, bright green and strangely familiar, interrupt his vision, and Shouta is forced to focus on them, to place their familiarity. Hizashi?

There’s an awful, repetitive noise, beeping frantically in Shouta’s ears. Briefly, Shouta wonders if he can physically hear his own racing thoughts pounding desperately on his skull. But no, he’s heard this sound too many times before. It’s a heart monitor.

He’s in the hospital. Hizashi is beside him. He’s in the hospital because the League somehow found his class. They found them, deep in the forest at an undisclosed location that no one should have known about. They found them, and Shouta fought tooth and nail to defend his kids, but they were taken from him anyway. Izuku and Hitoshi are gone, and Shouta is in the hospital now.

“Shou! Buddy, you with me? Look here, okay?”

Robotically, Shouta forces himself to follow the commands, tracking Hizashi’s finger back and forth until he eventually meets Hizashi’s gaze. Hizashi smiles, but the edges are tight.

“Zashi,” Shouta croaks. His throat aches with strain, and the word comes out gravelly and misshapen. He tries again. “Zashi. They took them. They took Hitoshi.”

Hizashi’s smile fell, and his hands slipped from Shouta’s wrist to clasp his hands gently. “I know.”

He guides Shouta’s head into the crook of his neck. Abruptly, Shouta feels too heavy to move away from the comfort, so he lets himself stay.

It’s only when the collar of Hizashi’s shirt grows damp that Shouta realizes that he’s crying. And with Hizashi murmuring quiet, tearful comfort in his ear, Shouta lets himself collapse.

[REPORT CONTINUES]

At time of infiltration, civilians and heroes were dispersed across area. Heroes Vlad King, Eraserhead located at classroom facility. Tiger,

Pixie-Bob, Mandalay (WWP) located approx. half-kilometer from classroom. Ragdoll located approx. half-kilometer from WWP, approx. 1 kilometer from classroom. All civilians located between these three positions.

Villain ID Mustard (Status: IN CUSTODY) used Quirk Gas to incapacitate civilians throughout forest.

2 villains (UID male, Quirk reptilian-nature[UNK], *reptilian appearance, purple hair*, Status: UNKNOWN); UID female, Quirk magnetism[UNK], *androgynous appearance, red shoulder-length hair*, Status: UNKNOWN) engaged WWP. Mandalay used Quirk Telepathy to inform heroes and civilians of infiltration and order them to classroom. 3 civilians (Iida Tenya, age 15; Kouda Kouji, age 15; Ojiro Mashirao, age 16) with WWP immediately left for classroom. Pixie-Bob incapacitated by UID villain.

At classroom, Vlad King stayed with 8 civilians (Ashido Mina, 15; Hanta Sero, 15; Kaminari Denki, 16; Kirishima Eijirou, 15; Monoma Neito, 16; Rikidou Satou, 16; Shirakumo Izuku, 15; Todoroki Shouto, 15). Eraserhead left classroom and engaged with villain (UID male, referred to as 'Dabi,' Quirk fire-manipulation[UNK], *heavily scarred, skin grafts, dark hair*, Status: UNKNOWN). Upon arrival at classroom, Iida, Kouda, Ojiro report villain Dabi 'melting' mid-battle. Eraserhead ordered civilians into classroom and moved into forest.

Hizashi forces Shouta to speak to the doctor before Tsukauchi, which is frankly absurd. Shouta knows that he's injured—he doesn't need a doctor to tell him that—but it's not going to stop him from going after his kids. He just needs someone with a healing Quirk, whether it be Recovery Girl or someone else, and he'll be just fine.

The doctor, however, doesn't seem inclined to agree.

After explaining the severity of Shouta's broken ribs, he gestured to his leg. "You have a small greenstick fracture in your fibula, but more concerning is the comminuted fracture in your tibia, meaning that your bone has splintered into smaller pieces at the fracture-site. Ordinarily, it would've been impossible to put any weight on this leg whatsoever, but the adrenaline from the... Well, adrenaline can cause the body to go past its natural limitations in times of great stress.

Unfortunately, the continued use of the leg after fracturing likely contributed to the severity of the break and displaced the bone so it's misaligned. Hence the external fixation here."

The doctor tapped at one of the rings braced around Shouta's calf. The touch was gentle, but Shouta still felt an uncomfortable tug from the wires running beneath his skin.

"This acts kind of like braces for your teeth," the doctor continued, not noticing the annoyed furrow in Shouta's brow. "The wires pull on the bone fragments to realign them into their natural position, so everything can heal properly. With the help of some of our associates with specialized Quirks for this kind of thing, we can speed up this process a bit, and you should be out of the brace in just over a week."

"A *week*?"

"Then, with additional support with some of our specialists and some physical therapy, you should have full-range of motion in your leg in just a matter of months! Any questions?"

Shouta readjusted himself to sit up higher in the bed, so that he can glower more effectively at the doctor. "Just one: how the fuck am I expected to save my students, who have been captured by villains, if I'm out of commission for a week?"

The doctor, pale and floundering, stuttered, "W-well, it would be, um, a bit longer than a week before you can return to work as a hero, since the breakage wouldn't actually be healed, just--"

"Just get Recovery Girl in here to fix me!"

"I'm afraid that that isn't an option." Then, cowering a little under Shouta's heavy glare, he amended, "Uh, that is, it's an *option*, perhaps, but certainly not one I would recommend. Complex injuries are best healed with *time* and occasional Quirk use to mitigate that progress. Healing it all at once, when the body hasn't had a chance to reset itself, would only serve as a temporary solution. It'll be healed, yes, but it's more than likely that rushing the process will cause additional problems and pain in the future. It'll almost certainly cause chronic pain, you might never fully recover your range of motion, and the bone will be much more likely to break again."

"So I either *wait* for my body to fix itself, however long that takes, or I get Recovery Girl in here and she can fix me *now*?"

“Well, like I said, it’d be far from a full recovery-”

“Get Recovery Girl. *Now.*”

[REPORT CONTINUES]

Ragdoll evacuated 6 civilians (Aoyama Yuuga, 16; Awase Yosetsu, 15; Hagakure Tooru, 16; Tsuburaba Kosei, 16; Jirou Kyouka, 15; Yaoyorozu Momo, 15) from forest to classroom. Did not encounter or engage villains.

1 villain (UID female, Quirk UNK, *age est. 15-18, blonde hair, yellow eyes*, Status: UNK) engaged 2 civilians (Asui Tsuyu, age 15; Uraraka Ochako, age 15), preventing their return to classroom.

2 civilians (Kendo Itsuka, 15; Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu, 15) engaged by villain ID Mustard. Mustard incapacitated by civilian Quirk use, disrupting Quirk Gas.

Villain ID Moonfish (Status: DECEASED) engaged 2 civilians (Bakugou Katsuki, 16; Shinsou Hitoshi, 15). Shinsou used Quirk Brainwashing to incapacitate Moonfish. Bakugou and Shinsou moved to mountain.

Recovery Girl isn’t happy with Shouta. Neither is Hizashi, clearly, but at least *Hizashi* knows to keep his mouth shut. Unfortunately, Recovery Girl evidently doesn’t fear Shouta’s glares like Hizashi does.

“This is very foolish of you,” she tells him, standing at the foot of his bed with her arms crossed. “If you had any sense, you’d let yourself recover per the doctor’s orders.”

“Are you going to heal me or not?”

Hizashi rubs his hand over Shouta’s shoulder. “Shou... maybe she’s right? You have to think about what’s best for you in the long-term.”

Shouta wants to laugh. He really does. But the sound gets caught in

his throat, and he chokes on it like a sob. “What’s best for *me*? What about what’s best for the kids? How can I be here, laying in a hospital bed, ‘*recovering*,’ when they’re lost somewhere with the League of Villains?! I’m the reason that they were captured in the first place, so I have to be there to get them back. I *have* to be.”

Hizashi sighs and increases the pressure rubbing into Shouta’s shoulder. “Okay...” he murmurs. “Okay.”

Shouta turns from him to Recovery Girl. She huffs but shakes her head acquiescingly. “Alright. You’ll be knocked out for at least the next 12 hours after this, though.”

“Thank you,” Shouta breathes. He knows this is illogical in the long-term, but he can’t stand the idea of doing nothing when Hitoshi and Izuku, *his kids*, need his help.

Recovery Girl pats him once on the knee, right above the brace, and Hizashi squeezes his shoulder again. They might not agree, but at least they understand.

“Make sure Tsukauchi is here when I wake up.”

[REPORT CONTINUES]

In forest, civilian Tokoyami Fumikage (age 15) lost control of Quirk Dark Shadow. Dark Shadow critically injured civilian Shouji Mezou (age 15). Dark Shadow engaged and terminated Moonfish. Dark Shadow engaged and terminated UID villain [*investigator note: creature identified as Nomu*]. Villain (UID male, referred to as ‘Compress,’ Quirk object-compression[UNK], Status: UNKNOWN) engaged Tokoyami and used Quirk to “trap him in a marble” according to testimony of Shouji.

Tsukauchi is waiting for Shouta when he regains consciousness. Shouta barely has a moment to blink the blariness from his eyes before Tsukauchi sighs tiredly and says, “You could’ve just let us handle this, Eraser.”

“No. I couldn’t have.”

Slowly sitting up, Shouta twists his left ankle and hesitantly bends his knee. His leg is swollen, and it aches terribly, and just this slight movement causes him to bite his lip in discomfort, but the brace has been removed, and it no longer *feels* broken. It’ll be enough.

With that in order, Shouta shakes the remaining grogginess from his thoughts. “Please tell me you know where my kids are, Tsukauchi.”

Tsukauchi breathes heavily through his nose and drops a manila folder onto Shouta’s lap. Inside is the official police report of the events of the training camp, which Shouta pushes aside for now. Beneath that is a map of the Kamino Ward district with several locations marked with red pen. Tsukachi leans over to tap at one marking.

“We think this is the League’s main hideout. It poses as a bar, but it hasn’t been open for months. The only people going in or out have been either unidentified or known villains and criminals. If Shinsou and Shirakumo are with the League, they’ll most likely be there.”

Shouta tenses at Tsukauchi’s use of ‘if.’ What other options are there? Shinsou and Shirakumo have to be with the League, because what would Shouta do otherwise?

He gestures to the other markings. “And these?”

“Other places we’ve seen them frequent occasionally. There’s no real pattern to most of them, except for here. It’s an abandoned warehouse of some kind. We think it’s being used to create Nomu, like the one you encountered at the USJ. There was another one at the training camp, but Tokoyami and Dark Shadow...” He trails off, but Shouta understands his meaning.

“Shit.”

Tsukauchi nods in solemn agreement.

“We’re assembling a team to raid the bar late this evening, at twenty-one-hundred. I know that you rushed your healing so that you can be involved, but if you’re not-”

“*I am*,” Shouta hisses, and Tsukauchi doesn’t argue further.

“Tonight, UA is hosting a press conference to address the incident and

the kidnapping of two of its students. It's mostly a guise, since UA plans to act as if we currently have no leads on the whereabouts of the students, which is obviously false." Tsukauchi gestures to the stack of information in Shouta's hands. "But it'll give the villains a false sense of security that they've gotten away with it, while we infiltrate them just after the conference airs. Nezu originally suggested having you attend the press conference, but he said we could cite your injuries as reason for your absence if you choose to participate in the raid itself, which I'm sure is the case.

"As of now, the team consists of All Might, Endeavour, Edgeshot, Kamui Woods, and an older retired hero called Gran Torino, whom All Might personally contacted. We're sending Best Jeanist and Mt. Lady out to that warehouse, just in case the League split itself up across multiple locations. Of course, since the bar is the suspected location that Shirakumo and Hitoshi are being held, I suspect that you'd wish to be involved with All Might's team."

Normally, Shouta would never take a job with All Might. He's too loud and too flashy for the stealth operations that Shouta's normally involved in, and he can't imagine how the hero will perform in the recovery of hostages from such a delicate situation.

"*All Might*? Why is he involved in something like this? I don't care that he's their teacher, or that he's the number one hero. I'm not endangering Hi- my *student's* lives, because he relies on brute force in situations that require tact."

Tsukauchi shoulders slump, and he casts his eyes to the closed, and apparently locked, door of Shouta's room.

"All Might told you about One for All, right? Did he mention a villain by the name of All for One? We suspect him to be the leader of the League of Villains. Not only does that make this... personal for All Might, but he's undeniably the most capable of taking All for One down."

So All Might hadn't killed All for One, and now that very same villain has taken Shouta's kids.

Paper crinkles, and Shouta looks down to find himself fisting the papers tightly in his hands. Beneath the folds, he can make out the glossy edges of two photographs with flashes of soft purple and green. Slowly, he unfurls the papers to reveal the photos in their entirety, and his eyes meet the crumpled faces of Izuku and Hitoshi, both

dressed in their UA uniforms for their school ID photos. In his, Izuku grinned big and proud, just like Oboro had in his photo so many years ago. Hitoshi's smile was smaller in comparison and upturned more on one side like a smirk. He'd just been accepted into General Studies when this was taken, but Shouta doesn't think he's imagining the determined glint behind Hitoshi's eyes.

These are *his kids*. The ones who watch foreign movies with subtitles and claim they were studying for English. The ones who Shouta fondly teases for dancing around their affections for each other like children in some awful rom-com. The ones who had fought against outsiders' perceptions of them to prove that they could be heroes and succeeded.

These are the kids that Shouta had failed to protect.

If All Might wasn't able to defeat All for One so many years ago, then what hope did Shouta have now? He needs All Might to save his kids.

Maybe All Might would succeed where Shouta had failed.

[REPORT CONTINUES]

In classroom, Vlad King and civilians were engaged by villain 'Dabi.' Ragdoll arrived on-site and assisted with incapacitating the villain. According to witness testimonies, 'Dabi' once again "melted." Todoroki and Shirakumo left the classroom unnoticed and moved into the forest.

On mountain, villain ID Muscular (Status: IN CUSTODY) engaged with Bakugou, Shinsou, and civilian Izumi Kouta (age 5). Eraserhead arrived on-site and incapacitated Muscular. Eraserhead attempted to evacuate civilians to classroom when engaged by villain 'Compress.' Villain used his Quirk to trap and incapacitate Izumi, Bakugou, and Shinsou. Compress reportedly "called the other villains to a rendezvous point" and attempted to escape according to testimony of Todoroki.

All active villains disengaged.

Shouta is discharged from the hospital almost immediately following his visit with Tsukauchi, only a few hours before he's due at the station for the raid. Even after having his injury healed by Quirk, the discharge is abnormally quick, but Shouta's made somewhat of a reputation for himself over the years. The nurses of the hero ward recognize him as that one noncompliant patient that comes in often and always leaves sooner than protocol would normally allow, so none of them bat an eye as he fills out the necessary paperwork. He even receives a couple fondly exasperated waves from the more familiar nurses.

Shouta signs the first form, and then stops suddenly. His pen hovers shakily over the space requesting the date.

Hizashi, who has been following him closely with anxious concern, looks over his shoulder. "Hey, what's up?"

"Today is... Today is Hitoshi's birthday."

"Oh, shit. Okay, okay, go sit down for a minute, Shou. Take a breather, alright? I'll take over from here."

Shouta feels like a puppet, with invisible wires guiding him down the hallway to the row of chairs in the hospital lobby. He collapses onto the uncomfortable plastic seat like his strings have been cut, drops his head into his palms, and forces himself to breathe. He can't afford to lose himself right now. He'd get Hitoshi, and Izuku, back, but he needs to be able to focus for that to happen.

Another body slumps into the chair beside him. Shouta doesn't look up until he hears the grunt of, "Sensei."

It's Bakugou. Aside from the faded circles beneath his eyes and a couple bruises peeking from the edges of his tank top, he looks alright, but Shouta thinks this is the quietest he's ever been.

"Bakugou," Shouta greets, when his student offers nothing else. "How are-"

"Cut the shit. All the rest of us are fine, aside from Crazy Arms, I guess, but even he'll be alright according to the docs. Although Bird Face probably feels like shit, but whatever." Shouta never thought he'd appreciate Bakugou's awful nicknames, but the familiarity is a welcome distraction from the unsteady beating of his heart.

“The point is, everyone is okay except for your kid and my fuckin’ brother.”

Bakugou must notice Shouta’s flinch, however miniscule, because he groans and adds, “Fuck. Okay, obviously that’s shitty. what I *meant* was that it could’ve been a lot worse. You got at least three of us from those shitty marbles, and no one died. You managed to stop that from happening.”

Shouta squints, but Bakugou refuses to meet his eyes. “Are you... thanking me?”

“You said it not me,” Bakugou says, shrugging. Shouta wonders if he’s imagining the embarrassed flush of his cheeks. “Maybe I’ll thank you for real when you get Deku back. The Eyebags kid too.”

Bakugou says this the same way he says everything: confidently with no room for argument. He fully expects Shouta to rescue Izuku and Hitoshi. He’s completely unaware of the police’s intel, of tonight’s planned raid, of All Might’s involvement. Bakugou knows *nothing*, but somehow, he knows Shouta will return his friends safely.

The vice that had been clamped around Shouta’s heart finally feels like it begins to loosen.

Bakugou stands, shoving his hands in his pockets and strolling toward the door leading to the patient rooms. “By the way, I should warn you that that bitch calling herself Deku’s mom is outside.” *Inko?* “Guess she heard the news that he’s missing, and now she’s losing her shit. Seemed fucking pissed to me. Security won’t let her in without a pass though, so you should be good if you take another exit or something. I’ll tell Icy-Hot you said hi.”

Bakugou disappears through the doors and Shouta alone in the lobby once again.

It would be simple to avoid Midoriya Inko. The hospital has more than one exit, after all. Some are even intended exclusively for use by pro-heroes, so they can move in and out without being caught by the press. If Inko is at the main exit, right out the doors of this lobby, like Shouta expects, then he has many other options for an escape.

But Shouta doesn’t *want* to avoid Midoriya Inko.

He stands, and ignoring how his left knee threatens to buckle under his sudden weight, he strides to the door. It slides open automatically,

exposing Shouta to the cool dusk air and to Midoriya Inko's frustrated face.

Like Bakugou had promised, she's blocked by two burly security guards. Neither of them are touching her, but Inko appears to strain under an invisible restriction, preventing her from moving into the hospital. In fact, it seems impossible for her to take any kind of step at all.

Her eyes, pinched and teary, catch on Shouta as he steps outside, and her mouth presses into a thin line. "You."

Shouta flinches.

One of the security guards standing in front of Inko turns to Shouta. "Sorry, sir. We're doing our best to remove her from the premises, but—"

"You did this!" Inko shrieks, and her voice breaks with a sob. She throws her weight forward, like she's trying to charge at Shouta, but her feet remain rooted firmly to the ground, likely from one of the guards' Quirks. She only barely manages to keep her balance and adjusts the momentum to point an accusing finger at Shouta. "You let this happen! *Again!* First Oboro and now Izuku!" A sob bursts from her lips, and Inko clasps a hand over her mouth as tears pour down her eyes. "My babies... *Both* of them. I knew this would kill him, just like Oboro! But you let it happen anyway! You—"

"I'm sorry."

Inko stops. Her whole body freezes. Not a single tear leaks from her eyes.

Shouta drops into the deepest bow he can manage.

"You're right," he says. His eyes are trained on the concrete below his feet. If Shouta looks at Inko's face, devastated by the loss of her remaining son, he might not be able to make it through the rest of his apology. "I failed Oboro. And now, even though I promised to do everything in my power to keep him safe, I've failed Izuku too. Not only as a hero, or as a teacher, but as someone who cares for him very much. I'm so sorry for this, Ms. Midoriya."

Shouta takes a breath, and when he hears no sound from Inko, he steels himself to rise. When he meets her eyes, they track every inch of his face analytically. Her mouth is still set in that firm, unforgiving

grimace, but she doesn't interrupt him.

"But I can swear to you that I will do everything in my power to get your son back safely. *That's* a promise I will keep."

[REPORT CONTINUES]

Todoroki and Shirakumo engaged with villain Compress at rendezvous point, approx. 1.5 kilometers east of classroom. Eraserhead arrived on-site and engaged villains. Villain ID Kurogiri (Status: UNKNOWN) arrived on-site and used Quirk Warp Gate for villains to escape. Villains Kurogiri, 'Dabi,' and 'Compress' remained with expressed intent to retain Shirakumo.

'Compress' used his Quirk to trap Shirakumo, but was then incapacitated by Eraserhead. Eraserhead removed several "marbles" from 'Compress's person. Kurogiri used Quirk Warp Gate and forced Eraserhead to disengage from 'Compress' who was warped to 'Dabi's position. Eraserhead used Quirk Erasure on the marbles in his possession and released Tokoyami, Bakugou, and Izumi. Shinsou was released and revealed to still be within the villains' possession. 'Dabi' claimed that they still possessed Shirakumo.

Eraserhead attempted to engage the villains as the villains attempted escape through Warp Gate. Shinsou used Quirk Brainwashing on Eraserhead to prevent him from following the villains.

Villains successfully escaped with Shirakumo and Shinsou in their possession.

Eraserhead was incapacitated by his injuries when help arrived on-site approx. 1.5 hours after the start of infiltration.

Civilians Shinsou and Shirakumo officially reported MISSING by PD at 2307. Recovery pending.

[REPORT ENDS]

Chapter End Notes

As you may have noticed, the chapter count has been updated, and the end is in sight! Right now, this is an approximation of

how many chapters are remaining, and this is subject to change depending on what happens in the actual writing. I've also added this fic to a series, in the case that i write some side fics for this universe after this fic concludes, or even an AU of this AU. if that's something you'd be interested in, subscribe to the series so you dont miss out!

Next up: a POV change :)

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

“What is a hero? What is justice? Is this society where we distinguish so cleanly between heroes and villains really fair?” Shigaraki rises, and Hitoshi catches the corner of a grin. “You’ve asked these questions too, haven’t you?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Hitoshi wakes, he is trapped.

He knows this, because he is seated in an uncomfortable chair, and his arms and legs are strapped down with thick metal bands. The familiar pain of a muzzle binds his jaw shut.

Hitoshi doesn’t recognize where he is, but it looks like some kind of restaurant or bar. A man with dry, aged hair leers tauntingly from a seat at a bar stool, and an assortment of other strangers surround him.

Of course, Hitoshi recognizes Shigaraki Tomura from the mall. When the man had interrupted his date-that-wasn’t-quite-a-date-but-he-wished-it-was-a-date. Hitoshi was going to confess to Izuku at the mall, dammit, and then they were going to get fro-yo or something, and it was going to be great. Except Fuck Hands McGee apparently had to ruin it by giving him and Izuku *trauma*. Sometimes, Hitoshi still thinks he can feel the phantom grime of those fingers around his neck, threatening to kill them with just a single touch.

Hitoshi is able to identify Kurogiri, too, as the smoke-like villain that attacked 1-A at the USJ. Izuku had described him once, and rambled for thirty minutes about the strange similarities between their Quirks while Hitoshi nodded along, too besotted by the shape of Izuku’s lips to really process what he was saying. He remembers, though, that Kurogiri has some kind of fog-based portal Quirk that acts as the League’s personal get-away vehicle in an emergency. The others, Hitoshi doesn’t recognize.

There’s a young girl next to Kurogiri, humming and carving something into the bar top with a knife. A man in a black morph suit seems to be playing rock-paper-scissors with himself like a lunatic, and an anthropomorphic lizards leans beside a man dressed in a yellow

trench coat, bizarrely painted mask, and feathered top hat. A younger man covered in scars and skin grafts picks disinterestedly at the staples attaching his damaged skin to his jawline.

Hitoshi is very obviously not safe with these people.

But, looking around the bar and finding only villains rather than allies, he's at least glad that the others *are* safe. Because wherever they are, they aren't *here*. Hitoshi had seen Bakugou and Kouta with his dad at the end of things. Todoroki and Tokoyami, too, although he doesn't know what they were even doing there in the first place. And no one else had been dragged through the portal with him, he thinks. Even though his dad had *tried*, foolishly following after Hitoshi despite the obvious pain weakening him, Hitoshi had stopped him. If he had made it through, Hitoshi is positive that his dad would have *died*.

Hitoshi is so thankful that he's the sole prisoner in this bar.

"Shigaraki Tomura. He is awake." Kurogiri doesn't even look up from the glass he is polishing.

Immediately, every set of eyes turns to Hitoshi, and he can't help but fidget. He's never been one to enjoy even friendly attention, let alone the attention of several villains who had just kidnapped him after attacking the people that he cares about.

Hitoshi doesn't remember passing out, although it's obvious that he must have done so almost immediately after being dragged through the portal. He's not sure if it had happened naturally, due to stress and adrenaline, or if it had been a side-effect of that Quirk that had been used on him, or if it was forced by something else altogether.

"Oh, good." Shigaraki's smile is barely visible behind the *disembodied hand* covering his face.

Yeah, Hitoshi is *definitely* not safe here.

They haven't hurt him yet, though. Even the muzzle is relatively loose over his mouth, and the sharp metal doesn't dig into Hitoshi's skin like he's used to. His old foster family, the one before he was taken in by Shouta, fastened it much tighter than this.

(Sometimes, when they begin to fall asleep together on Shouta's couch, Izuku would trace over the scars indenting Hitoshi's jaw and frown. He asked, once when the late hour had loosened their tongues, if they bring him pain. Hitoshi said that they did, but only when he

looked in the mirror.)

Shigaraki scratches his neck with his actual, non-disembodied hand. “What time is it? They should be on soon.”

“Patience,” Kurogiri scolds, in that same patiently exasperated tone that Shouta sometimes uses on Hitoshi. He checks his watch. “It isn’t quite time.”

Shigaraki scoffs. “Set the channel. I don’t want to miss a second of their humiliation.”

The school-girl villain giggles. She’s bouncing the knife between her fingers, and Hitoshi reflexively leans away even though she’s all the way across the bar, and he can’t move much anyway. He doesn’t like that look of empty glee in her eyes as she watches the glint of the knife pass between her hands.

Hitoshi’s discomfort draws the eye of the heavily scarred man, who manages to look bored despite the severe damage to his face. “Don’t mind Toga. She won’t bite.”

Knife Girl, Toga, pouts. “Only because you won’t let me! I just wanna make him bleed a li’l...”

The lizard-looking villain rolls his eyes. “Yeah, and if you do that then it’ll make it so much harder to convince-”

“Shut up!”

Shigaraki points to the TV, set to a popular news channel. The banner beneath the anchorman reads: ‘LIVE: UA PRESS CONFERENCE’. Hitoshi frowns beneath the muzzle. This is probably about *him*.

Then, Hitoshi’s eyes catch on the date in the corner of the screen, and he almost wants to laugh. It’s been 48ish hours since he was taken, and it’s his *birthday*. Of fucking course it is.

“It’s starting.”

The news feed cuts. Nezu and Vlad King each stand across from a herd of reporters, separated only by a table set with microphones. As the two of them bow politely, Hitoshi notices a third, empty chair set next to Vlad.

His dad should be there, but he’s *not*.

And that sends a deeper chill down Hitoshi's spine than the actual villains do.

"Pro-hero Eraserhead, the homeroom teacher of hero class 1-A, unfortunately cannot be here today due to the severity of his injuries following the attack," Nezu explains, gesturing to the unoccupied seat. "Pro-hero Vlad King, teacher for hero class 1-B, and I will be fielding all questions today."

Hitoshi's breath hitches. The burnt villain flits his eyes to him curiously, just for a second, and Hitoshi struggles to not allow his sudden horror show outwardly. He doesn't think that the League knows of his identity as Eraserhead's son, and he doesn't want to give it away now.

Shouta *never* stays in the hospital longer than he has to. Both Hitoshi and Uncle Hizashi give him a lot of shit for it, because he'd rather work himself into the ground than rest long enough to properly recover. After all, USJ had been a Code Red, and Shouta still shouldered himself out of his hospital room the day after. The only way Shouta would still be in the hospital right now is if he were unconscious.

Or worse.

(Hitoshi thinks of Kouta, left all alone after his parents died as heroes.)

No. Shouta's fine. Everyone's fine, and Hitoshi *will* be fine.

Blearily, Hitoshi understands that Nezu and Vlad are apologizing, taking responsibility for the danger brought to students under their protection. It wasn't their *fault*, though. The only blame lies with the villains, the ones watching the press conference with eager twinkles in their eyes. They're enjoying this, Hitoshi knows. The unrest that they have caused, the distrust in heroes and in UA, the loss of faith in the community. This is what they want to happen.

They want UA to be treated like the villains.

"We deeply apologize for allowing harm to come to our students and for sowing unease in our society. We will be reviewing our security for possible risks in the future to avoid such an incident from occurring again." Nezu again stands and bows as far as his little rat body will allow. "While the villains suspected of this attack have not yet been located at this time, UA and the police are both working to resolve

this matter quickly. Thank you for your attention.”

The TV shuts off with a click.

Shigaraki sighs and taps his fingers in a staggered rhythm against his jawline. “Hmm. How disappointing. The heroes make a single mistake, and the crowd treats them like villains. Are heroes not human too? No one is infallible, so why act like heroes should be?” Sneering, he spins in his stool and rests his elbows on his knees to lean toward Hitoshi. “Society has so many problems. Don’t you agree, Shinsou?”

The lizard adds, “Stain says that once a hero receives compensation for their work, they really aren’t heroes anymore. There are hardly any true heroes left.”

“Our current system transforms people’s lives into fortune and glory. And when these people fail, they’re blamed rather than encouraged to do better.

“What is a hero? What is justice? Is this society where we distinguish so cleanly between heroes and villains really fair?” Shigaraki rises, and Hitoshi catches the corner of a grin. “You’ve asked these questions too, haven’t you?”

Hitoshi manages to keep his flinch restrained and schools his face to appear impassive, like Shouta had taught him. He won’t let these villains know that he *has* asked these questions. When the kids on the playground refused to speak to him. When his teachers encouraged him to try for schools other than UA. When the audience of the sports festival had muttered “villain” under their breath, and he received less offers than the ‘heroic’ students in his class.

Everyone looked at Hitoshi and saw a villain.

(Not everyone.)

“Dabi, take off his restraints.”

The scarred villain lifts an eyebrow. “Really? He’s probably gonna fight.”

Shigaraki’s visible eye crinkled. “No matter. We know how to avoid his Quirk if we must. What’s important is that we show that we aren’t like the others.”

The *others*. Hitoshi’s elementary teachers. His past foster parents. The

police officer that had found him that one time he ran away from the group home.

(But what about Shouta? And Hizashi? Izuku? Bakugou and Todoroki and all the other kids he's met in 1-A? *They* weren't like the others.)

Dabi shrugs and crouches in front of Hitoshi's seat. He undoes the latches around his ankles first, and Hitoshi is briefly tempted to kick out at him, but Dabi moves on to his wrist before Hitoshi solidifies that decision. Finally, he unclasps the latch forcing his jaw closed, and Hitoshi reflexively inhales a sharp breath through his mouth and works out the stiffness in his neck.

"I apologize for being so forceful in my methods," the man in the top hat says. "Despite our appearance, we aren't just a crazy mob committing crimes without cause."

No, Hitoshi thinks. They're worse than that. They're too organized to just be some mindless gang of foolhardy criminals. And after Shigaraki's conversation with Izuku in the mall, they *definitely* have a purpose now.

Shigaraki rises from his stool. "You know, we didn't just take you just coincidentally. The details might vary, but all of us here have been restricted and mistreated in some way. We might seem different, but *you* understand, don't you?"

Hitoshi grits his teeth. The familiar ache of the muzzle hasn't yet left his jaw.

"I understand."

Shigaraki grins, like he's won a prize, but Hitoshi hasn't finished yet.

"But you shouldn't bother *recruiting* me. I won't become a villain."

(Hitoshi had been cruel to Izuku, once. He had belittled Izuku with hateful remarks, humiliated him with a devastating loss on national television, and sent him into a panic attack. An hour later, Izuku had smiled at Hitoshi with misty tears still clouding his eyes and welcomed him into the hero course.)

Standing to move into Hitoshi's space, Shigaraki's brow furrows. "I saw how they treated you. They *booed* your victories. How dare a child with a villain's Quirk defeat those little heroes?" They were all thinking it!"

Hitoshi shakes his head. “Not all of them.”

(Bakugou stood above him, first to Hitoshi’s second. Hitoshi looked up. “I bet you hate this. A villain’s Quirk standing beside the heroes.”)

“I don’t give a shit about your Quirk,” Bakugou sneered, “but if you wanna be a hero so bad, then fucking *act* like one.”)

“Isn’t it enough, though?” Shigaraki asks, and a few of the other villains nod along. They all understand, it seems, the weight of awful expectations weighing the heart down. “When most of society works against you, what do a few kind souls matter?”

What do they matter?

(Bakugou, walking through the Beast’s Forest with Hitoshi trailing behind. “Remember how I said I’d save my apology until I could tell that you deserved it?” He slowed down and allowed Hitoshi to catch up. “Well, I’m fucking sorry, I guess.”)

(Izuku, lying beside Hitoshi in the grass and panting from the exhaustion of overusing his Quirk in training. He smiled and turned big, gleeful eyes on Hitoshi. “You’re gonna be a great hero, Shinsou! I just know it!”)

(Shouta, undoing the muzzle fastened over Hitoshi’s face. “They’re wrong, kid. You can be a hero, if that’s what you really want.” He placed a gentle hand on Hitoshi’s shoulder and guided him out of the house. “Come with me. I’ll keep you safe, okay?”)

“No.”

Hitoshi doesn’t know where disagreeing will get him. Shigaraki needs no weapon other than his Quirk, and he quite literally holds Hitoshi’s life in those wrinkled hands. If he upsets him now... that could very well be the last thing Hitoshi ever does.

He risks it anyway.

“I won’t disappoint the people that care about me. I won’t join you.”

Shigaraki’s hand flexes, and Kurogiri’s smoke bristles like the fur of a scared cat. “Shigaraki Tomura,” Kurogiri warns, sounding desperate for a reason that Hitoshi can’t fathom. “*Don’t.*”

Hitoshi tenses, bracing for the pain of disintegration, but Shigaraki

just holds his hand mid-air and doesn't approach further. "Don't attack him. Any of you," he commands. The villains listen and warily relax. Even Kurogiri's mist falls flat to resemble the shape of a man again.

With three careful fingers, Shigaraki adjusts the hand covering his face. He does so nonchalantly, like he's touching a hat that's slipped askew rather than a *whole disembodied hand*.

Hitoshi shudders, and Shigaraki smiles with his yellowed teeth.

"I wish you would've listened," he says. "Maybe we would've come to an understanding."

"Understanding?" Hitoshi scoffs unthinkingly and sinks further into his chair as Shigaraki leers. He tries to keep his gaze steady, though. He doesn't want his fear to show too blatantly.

Shigaraki sighs. He even sounds *disappointed*. "Well, the heroes said that they're investigating us, so we don't have time to continue a casual discussion. I have no choice, then..." He rolls his head to look behind himself, and Hitoshi notices that the TV has been switched to a display reading 'SOUND ON.'

Who is listening?

"Sensei... lend me your power."

Sensei? Is there someone worse than Shigaraki?

"Kurogiri," Shigaraki continues. "Knock him out again."

Oh, no.

Hitoshi reels back, but he knows there's not much he can do in this situation. He's no longer strapped down, sure, but there's half-a-dozen villains in this room, and they know his Quirk. He isn't prepared for a fight like this. He won't be able to win.

The only way out is to run, if he can even manage that. The door is right behind him, though, so maybe if he's quick enough...

There's a knock on the door.

Hitoshi squints. It doesn't seem very in-character of a *villain* to knock.

"Hello? This is Kamino Pizza La."

Then, the wall erupts in an explosion of brick.

Through the debris, Hitoshi recognizes All Might only by the blur of tacky American colors. Immediately, Shigaraki calls for Kurogiri, obviously hoping for a quick escape.

Nothing happens.

The yellow glow of Kurogiri's eyes go round. "Shigaraki Tomura, I can't-"

"You aren't leaving."

Two hands settle on Hitoshi's shoulders. He almost flinches, cautious and confused under the circumstances, but he would recognize his dad's voice anywhere.

Hitoshi looks up, and Eraserhead's grip tightens protectively. He doesn't move his gaze away from Kurogiri.

Long, thick vines like tree branches wind through the bar and wrap the villains in a tight grip. Dabi's body flares with blue fire, but a small spot of yellow crashes into him, and Dabi collapses limply in the branch's hold.

The yellow blur zips away and stops just at All Might's shoulder, revealing itself to be some short old guy that Hitoshi doesn't recognize. Kamui Woods hangs in the opening behind them with branches erupting from his right arm to wrap securely around the villains.

All Might grins. "Don't worry, young Shinsou! We are here!"

Eraserhead squeezes his shoulders, and Hitoshi finally relaxes.

His dad is here.

"The press conference..." The villain in the top hat hisses, squirming futilely in Woods's grip. "Was this pre-arranged?!"

"You thought we wouldn't have a plan?" Eraserhead drawls. To anyone else, he would sound indifferent. Bored, even. But Hitoshi can recognize the tense line of his jaw as he keeps his unwavering gaze on Kurogiri. He's concerned.

Edgeshot appears through the narrow opening of the closed door. "When you feel that you're on the offensive is when you lack defense."

He opens the door, revealing dozens of armed police-men just behind it. "We aren't the only ones here. You're surrounded outside, too."

"Edgeshot," Eraserhead hisses. His eyes are watering.

"Right!"

Edgeshot flattens his arm into a strand of thread and pierces Kurogiri so he collapses. "You can relax now, Eraserhead. He'll be asleep for a bit. We have a few minutes before he wakes up."

Eraserhead releases his Quirk. Grabbing Hitoshi by the chin, he turns his head to face him. "Are you hurt at all?"

"No. I'm- I'm okay."

Eraserhead stares, like he's deciding whether he wants to believe Hitoshi or not, but he nods after a moment. He straightens and looks around the room. "Where's Izuku?"

"What?"

Izuku? He should be nowhere near here, in this awful place with these awful people. Izuku should be somewhere *safe*.

Eraserhead's jaw slackens. Hitoshi can hear his breath hitch in his throat.

From his spot on the floor, Shigaraki murmurs, "Oh, the lab rat isn't here. He's tucked away somewhere safe, far away."

The old man cusses and lifts a hand to his earpiece. "Shirakumo isn't here. Check the facility."

"This can't be the end for us..." Shigaraki whispers, uninterrupted. Squinting, Hitoshi thinks he can see a tear glistening between the disembodied fingers on his face. "I've only just begun. I'll destroy this society that you've constructed on the vague ideals of peace and justice. It's why I've recruited so many people for my cause and created so many tools. This is... this is only the beginning. I can't lose to the final boss on the first level..."

"Shigaraki," All Might booms. "Where is your boss?"

Freezing, Shigaraki halts his muttering.

His boss? Who cares? What about *Izuku*?

“All Might-” Eraserhead growls, but All Might speaks over him.

“Where is he, Shigaraki?!”

The old hero yells, “Jeanist isn’t responding. Something’s wrong at the-”

A haunting wail pierces the air.

Hitoshi cowers and reflexively throws his hands over his ears to block out the noise. Fountains of viscous sludge pour from thin air, and fish-eyed beasts push through the fluid, screaming in a ghostly pitch. Hitoshi has never seen anything like them before, but he recognizes them immediately by their exposed brains.

(On the nights that Izuku stayed over, there were times that he became restless in his sleep. He would kick out at Hitoshi in the futon next to him and even form writhing masses of fog along the floor. When Hitoshi woke him from these nightmares, only when he was afraid that Izuku might hurt himself with his involuntary seizing, Izuku would tell him about the USJ incident or the fight with Stain. Hitoshi will trace over his scars as Izuku told him stories of mindless beasts synthetically created for violence.)

Eraserhead hisses, “Nomu.” He grabs Hitoshi and yanks him toward the opening in the wall. “I thought Jeanist secured the factory.”

The old man clobbers a Nomu with a booted foot. “He isn’t responding.”

“Kurogiri’s still unconscious,” Edgeshot yells, helplessly. “This isn’t him.”

“Dad-” Hitoshi starts. He’s interrupted by Eraserhead shoving his head down and vaulting over his shoulders like a springboard, kneeling an approaching Nomu in the face. Almost imperceptibly, he hisses when he makes contact.

“Hitoshi, we need to go!”

“Go where?” Hitoshi yelps, digging his feet into the ground when his dad tries to shove him through the opening. In the street below, the police struggle to shoot at the swarm of Nomu falling from air. Endeavour clears a group of them with a blast of flame.

A branch of wood winds past them, its tip pointing upwards. “Eraser,”

Woods says, “get the hostage out of here.”

“Right.” Shouta grabs Hitoshi around the waist and hauls him into his arms.

Inside, somebody chokes.

Looking over Eraserhead’s shoulder, Hitoshi watches as that same dark slime begins to pour from Dabi’s mouth. Then the girl’s. One by one, each villain gags on the tar, until it streams from behind the hand gripping Shigaraki’s face.

“Sensei...” Shigaraki whispers, somehow audible over the wails of the Nomu and frantic shouts of the heroes. “Thank you...”

With one hand secured around Hitoshi, Eraserhead throws his capture weapon to the roof of the building and hauls them both up.

All Might lunges. “Shigaraki! Take me to him!”

The sludge cocoons itself around Shigaraki, and the last thing Hitoshi sees before losing his visual is All Might’s fist closing on empty air.

“No!”

Eraserhead and Hitoshi land gracelessly on the roof, safe from the Nomu fighting below. Hitoshi rolls to his feet quicker than his dad does.

Eraserhead stays sprawled on ground and stares blankly at the stars above them.

“Dad?”

Slowly, Shouta’s eyes roll to Hitoshi.

“Dad, where’s Izuku?”

Chapter End Notes

Shouta's intrusive thoughts: reliving trauma about oboro and the anxiety of being responsible for the lives of his students

Hitoshi's intrusive thoughts: hehe izuku pretty... im so gay

Next Chapter: another POV change :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

When Izuku wakes, he is...

Well, he doesn't know.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Izuku wakes, he is...

Well, he doesn't know.

His head feels... fuzzy. It almost feels like, sometimes, when he's been studying for too long and his thoughts start to escape him, and he sits and stares at the same English conjugations blankly. Hitoshi always likes to say that Izuku's brain gets "foggy" and then laughs at his own joke for too long.

Hitoshi... *Hitoshi*... What happened to Hitoshi?

He was... taken. Trapped? Something had been *wrong* with Hitoshi, he had been in danger, and Izuku had tried to stop it, and now, Hitoshi is nowhere to be seen, and Izuku is here.

Where is here?

It looks kind of like a hospital, with its sterile white walls, and the machines lined up next to Izuku's bed. Most of their screens display numbers and percentages and shapes that don't mean anything to Izuku, but one is clearly a heart monitor. A series of tubes and needles protrude from his arms, some running to the unfamiliar machines and others to a couple hanging bags of fluid. When Izuku furrows his brow and twists his neck to the side, something tickles his forehead, like he is wearing a strangely shaped hat or hairnet.

Slowly, hoping to not disrupt the sloshing he feels in his head, Izuku sits up. Or he *tries* to. It doesn't work.

A dark strap spans across his chest and biceps, pinning Izuku to the bed with his arms at his side. He can't move.

The door to the room opens with a shudder, and an old man in a white lab-coat bustles in. A bristly moustache sits on his upper lip, and his eyes are covered by strange goggles. He locks at Izuku, conscious and still struggling in his restraints, and scribbles something on his clipboard. "Patient awoke at 19:04, approximately two hours after release from Compression," he murmurs. "BP one-oh-five over fifty-seven, fifty-nine BPM. Oh-two at ninety-six percent, very good."

Izuku blinks. He isn't sure if he should be able to understand the doctor's words. Are they some kind of code? Opening his mouth, he tries to ask, but the only sound that comes is a feeble cough.

The doctor hums and flicks one of the bags of fluid hanging by the bed. Its tube leads to the needle in the back of Izuku's hand. "Seems parched. Interesting. He should be well-hydrated, although it's possible that his Quirk has a biological effect, and he dehydrates more quickly... If I recall correctly, the previous subject had a similar condition. I'll have to search my notes to confirm."

He jots another note on his clipboard.

Coughing, Izuku tries again. "Where—"

"Not a hospital," the doctor answers without glancing up from his notes. "But I wouldn't worry too much. I believe I've finally perfected this process so that the past memories and demeanor will be entirely erased this time. Won't be having any repeats of the original, hopefully."

It takes a moment too long, but Izuku catches on. *Not a hospital.*

Where is he?

Then, he catches on something else.

Previous subject. This time. The original.

This is important, Izuku knows, but he doesn't understand.

From a chrome table, the doctor picks up a clear test-tube with a rubber stopper. Then, he picks up a large needle.

Izuku instinctively jerks away, but the sluggish movement is easily aborted by the strap holding him down. Still, processing the evident danger of the situation, he continues to squirm helplessly.

The doctor pins his arm down with a gloved hand. “This is better if you hold still.”

(In the mall, Shigaraki had pinned Hitoshi and Izuku with a bare hand. His pinkies hovered threateningly over their jugulars. “I suggest you hold still,” he had rasped. Izuku had looked at the hand over Hitoshi’s neck, and he listened.)

Izuku doesn’t listen to the doctor. He writhes and struggles and flinches. It doesn’t stop the thick needle from being jammed into his inner elbow.

He winces, and the doctor screws the test tube to the exposed end of the needle. Dark blood begins to pump sluggishly. “Definitely dehydrated,” the doctor comments as he twists the tube off and yanks the needle out. Pocketing the blood, he abruptly leaves through the door that he had entered from.

Izuku counts to twenty, needing to backtrack once or twice when he loses count, then bites his lip. He only lets up when he tastes blood, and the pain reorganizes his thoughts enough to begin processing his situation.

This is not a hospital.

That man only *looks* like a doctor.

Izuku is not safe.

He needs to *leave*.

Clumsily, Izuku fumbles for the band across his chest and biceps. His range of motion is severely limited, but his fingers finally brush against a small latch. He claws at it, but nothing gives. He twists his neck and squints, hoping he can figure out the release mechanism and free himself. On the end of the strap is a metal square with a button release in the center like a seatbelt. He wiggles and squirms until he manages to get a finger on the button. When he presses on it, desperately, it flashes red. It doesn’t unlock.

He tries again.

Again.

And again.

Nothing.

He gives up on the clasp and tries to grab either side of the strap and *pull*, but he's so weak, and he can't get the leverage he needs to force it apart. This isn't going to work.

Izuku looks around, hoping for something—*anything*—he can use to get himself out of here. He's surrounded by all kinds of machines and medical-looking objects, but nothing is familiar enough that it sparks any ideas, nothing that he can *reach*.

Experimentally, Izuku tries for his Quirk and is surprised to see a small, flimsy fog cloud appear above his chest. His moment of elation, though, is short-lived. What is he supposed to do with *this*? His useless, *weak* Quirk can't get him out of this.

(Izuku asked All Might, once, if he thought Izuku could be a hero with just a Quirk like Fog. All Might had smiled at him, pityingly, with the same glint in his eyes as when adults look at Izuku and see Oboro instead, and he reminded Izuku that the offer of One for All was still on the table.)

The door handle twists, and Izuku quickly dissipates his fog. The doctor, as he enters, catches his eye on the last wispy remnants. "Feeling better, then. Keep your Quirk active, if you want. It'll make things easier, and I doubt it can do much for you right now, anyway. Don't worry. It'll be more useful by the time I'm done."

The doctor waits for a moment, seemingly patient, and Izuku stubbornly does not reactivate his Quirk.

The doctor doesn't seem too bothered by this. He shrugs and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small vial of clear liquid. He sticks the cap with a thin syringe and fills it.

"No matter," he says, tapping the side of the syringe. "Enjoy your disobedience while it lasts, I suppose."

Once again, he pins Izuku by the wrist and presses the syringe into the muscle of his shoulder. Futilely, Izuku tries to reach for him with the opposite hand and rip the syringe away, but he can't reach, and the mysterious fluid is injected into his bloodstream.

"What—"

"Just a simple drug that targets your Quirk factor and catalyzes

transcription. Should cause overexpression. Might even activate transcription of previously silenced regions, although I'll have to actively conduct some genetic modification for anything truly useful..." He trails off and move to stand behind Izuku's head. Not wanting to lose sight of him, Izuku tilts his head, but the doctor forces his head back so Izuku stares at the ceiling. Whatever is placed over Izuku's head is readjusted, and cold prickling sensations begin to cover his scalp.

As Izuku hears the doctor step away, he feels a chill spread over his hands. He looks down and finds tendrils of fog wrapping around his fingers. His cheeks and forehead grow cold and damp, and his vision clouds over with a green haze.

Startled, he attempts to deactivate his Quirk and diffuse the mist.

Nothing happens.

Izuku's chest feels heavy with that cold, thick fog. He can't control it.

"Oh, good. Looks like everything's working." Footsteps return behind Izuku, accompanied by the rolling wheels of a tall machine that Izuku can barely see out of the corner of his eye. A hand presses some buttons, and a display of several straight, horizontal lines appears. After a moment, they suddenly burst with jagged points and dips oscillating across the screen.

"I don't think we have the time for an MRI like I would prefer, since Sensei expects we'll have company soon enough, but this should do for the preliminary procedure. Just tracking down where in your motor cortex coordinates with Quirk activation... and then a partial lobotomy of the frontal lobe..." the doctor explains. He seems to be talking to himself more than to Izuku. "Lift your left foot for me."

Izuku bites his lip and doesn't comply.

"Excellent," the doctor says, as if Izuku had done as he asked anyway. Something with a dull point is pressed into Izuku's scalp, like a pen. "We'll focus there for the procedure. Tell me, are you able to control your Quirk at all?"

This, Izuku actually tries to do, but only because he hates this feeling of not being in control of his own body. He thinks he manages to blink the fog from his eyes, but it only builds more densely around his hands.

“Interesting. Kurogiri experiences issues regulating the inactive build-up, as well. We’ll see what we can do about that this time around.”

Kurogiri?

The doctor pulls away and finally reenters Izuku’s line of sight to sit in a chair. He pulls a laptop onto his knees, the screen turned away from Izuku, and taps silently at the keys. “Your Quirk factor... it’s fascinating really. So many possibilities for beneficial mutation. So much potential for *improvement*.”

The doctor smiles and looks over the rims of his glasses, making eye contact with Izuku for the first time. “Must run in the family.”

Izuku blinks. And blinks again.

The doctor returns to fiddling with his laptop, murmuring about alleles and mutations, but Izuku is still stuck on those last words. They felt... significant, even though Izuku hasn’t processed their meaning yet.

He needs to think.

Of course his Quirk ran in his family. That’s how they worked. Although, his mom had a weak telekinesis Quirk, and his dad had hydrokinesis over water droplets. The only family member who had something similar to Izuku was...

Oboro.

Oboro?

What happened to Oboro?

A frantic beeping fills the room, and the doctor laughs under his breath.

Izuku shuts his eyes, futilely hoping to block out the noise. He needs to *think*. What does any of this have to do with Oboro? What does *he* have to do with Oboro?

His Quirk? His Quirk has potential. “Potential for improvement,” is what the doctor said. To be mutated, ad changed, and manipulated.

Izuku remembers black mist surrounding him at the USJ. He remembers a dark mass and yellow eyes blocking his path. He remembers a fog, a *cloud*, of humidity that he couldn’t affect.

Kurogiri.

Kurogiri is Oboro.

Izuku chokes, and for a moment, he wonders if he's suffocating on his own fog pooling thickly in his throat. He isn't. It's solely his own horror and fear clutching his lungs.

Oboro had been here, strapped to this same bed, facing this doctor. He had been twisted and warped and changed. He had been turned into *that*. A *villain*. A *thing* that can hardly even be considered Oboro.

Now Izuku is doomed to the same fate.

(His mother always said that he'd end up just like Oboro. Had she been right?)

No. He can't let that happen. He has people that believe in him, that believe in *Izuku*.

(One time in middle school, Izuku had overworked himself trying to create a large, dense cloud in their backyard, like he'd seen Oboro do in pictures. Kacchan found him passed out in the grass an hour later. "Stop comparing yourself to that dead bastard," Kacchan said as he handed Izuku another bottle of water. "You're good enough on your own without being someone else. You think I'd let just anybody be my hero partner?")

(After the mall, while Aizawa argued with a mother that Izuku hadn't seen in months, Hitoshi pulled their hands together and squeezed. "Look at me," he had murmured, drawing Izuku's eyes away from his sobbing mother. "Listen to me. Not her. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She doesn't know you, and she's *wrong*. Izuku, you are strong, and smart, and capable. You aren't going to be the next Oboro. You can take care of yourself.")

(Aizawa told him, once, that he expelled any student that he thought wouldn't have potential. Izuku had seen it firsthand on the first day of classes after the Quirk assessment test. Aizawa knew Oboro, knew his strength and kindness and capability, and he still looked Izuku in the eyes and said, "You have the potential to be a great hero." Izuku *believed* him.)

Izuku can't let himself become Oboro.

He *won't*.

Izuku snaps his eyes open, and something clasps over his face.

It's a gas mask. The doctor, who has moved to Izuku's bedside without him even noticing, flicks a switch on a smaller machine and a sour-tasting gas pours from the mask covering his face.

Izuku tries to hold his breath, but a sudden pain behind his ear causes him to inhale involuntarily. The doctor waves a scalpel over Izuku's eyes, and blood drops from the tip to land between Izuku's eyes. "This'll be much easier if you just breathe through it," the doctor suggests. "When you wake up, you won't even remember any of this, so it'll be like it never happened in the first place. Much easier on the psyche that way, I've discovered. Just embrace it."

Izuku won't.

He won't become Oboro.

With every inhale, Izuku can feel his thoughts slipping away from him, so he scrambles for something, anything. But all he has is his Quirk and the fog building uselessly in his palms. That wasn't even enough for *Oboro*, so how would it be enough for *Izuku*?

He's panicking. He can't allow himself to panic.

(He told Aizawa, after the USJ, that he wanted to be a hero like him. What would Eraserhead do, in this situation?)

Izuku just needs to *think*.

He remembers, suddenly, the UA entrance exam. He remembers the towering zero-pointer. He remembers how he felt so helpless, unable to stop it.

But he *did*.

And he could now.

Izuku knows that, right now, he can't control his Quirk, not like he normally can, but that doesn't matter. He'll make it work, if only because he has to.

The doctor moves away to stand at a nearby metal table with several instruments laid across it. Izuku spies one that can't be anything other than a drill and hastily averts his eyes. He waits for the doctor's attention to be diverted—when he's focused on sterilizing something

like an icepick—and finally lets his Quirk go.

Immediately, fog pours from him like a gaseous river, and Izuku struggles to slow the flow. It feels like a clogged hose, almost. The water is still on, and the pressure builds until it threatens to burst through the rubber. Slowly, Izuku untwists the kink and releases the pressure.

He hasn't struggled with Fog like this since he was a child, and his Quirk was still new, but he remembers the techniques. He just needs to go slow.

Even when he feels like he doesn't have the luxury of 'slow.'

Izuku concentrates, and a gaseous wall of fog forms over the tube of the gasmask, blocking the anesthetic. He creates another band of fog between the mask and his face and thickens it until he can breathe cool, clean air again.

The doctor is sterilizing the drill now. His back is still to Izuku.

For a moment, Izuku feels like he should be insulted that he and his Quirk aren't perceived as enough of a threat for the doctor to pay attention to them. But Izuku can admit that this blind perception of his helplessness is an asset in this situation, and quells the offense.

It takes longer than he would've liked, but Izuku manages to mold the fog over his face into a vaguely triangular shape, and the mask slips fully off of him. His fog acts more fluid than solid right now, and manipulating it feels something like sculpting with molasses. He can create a vague shape if he *really* tries, but it threatens to slide back into a senseless blob the moment that his attention lapses.

At least Izuku isn't at risk of losing consciousness anymore. That's good.

He's still trapped, though, by the thick band locked across his torso.

The doctor looks to be sterilizing the last of his tools, and Izuku is *running out of time*.

He reaches for the clasp again, but aborts the movement halfway. If it didn't work before then it won't work now.

("You can't be a hero with just one trick.")

He needs to *think*.

Again, Izuku remembers the zero-pointer. He remembers filling its body with dense fog. He remembers how it collapsed, uselessly, to the ground.

He doesn't know that it'll work, but he funnels his fog into the locking mechanism and fills it with wet humidity. It sparks once, twice.

Nothing else happens.

Izuku desperately fumbles for the latch and presses down on the button. No glaring red light appears, but the lock still doesn't budge.

He's panicking. He knows he's panicking. His heart is beating furiously against his chest, and it feels like he's choking on his own lungs. The doctor still isn't looking at him, but he'll surely turn around any second. Izuku is out of time. He needs more time.

No. Izuku just needs to *think*.

Locks are mechanical. There might be fancy sensors and codes, but at their base, they are nothing more than a series of bars and gears. They can be manipulated.

Izuku takes a steadying breath and closes his eyes. He prays that the doctor will stay distracted long enough for him to do this.

He visualizes his fog, how it's shaped within the complicated machinery of the locking mechanism. Its scale is small, and his fog still writhes disobediently under his control, so the details are fuzzy, but Izuku presses his eyelids tighter and *concentrates*. Aching slowly, he tugs and twists and pulls on his fog, and the mechanism around it moves too.

Something clicks.

The band unlocks.

Izuku opens his eyes.

"*What* are you doing?"

Izuku rolls off the table, landing in an off-balance crouch and narrowly dodging the blade of the saw in the doctor's grip. He's slower than usual, the drug in his veins still weighing him down, but he's still more agile than the elderly doctor. With a sweep of his foot,

Izuku knocks the legs out from under him, and he crashes helplessly to the floor.

For a brief, sadistic moment, Izuku is tempted to grab that drill from the table and turn it on the doctor. Instead, he reaches for the metal tray holding the row of tools and empties it.

“I am *not* Oboro,” Izuku hisses. He crashes the tray over the doctor’s head, and the doctor collapses.

Chapter End Notes

i wanted this chapter to be longer... but finals have made life hectic so this is what you get lol. my semester's over now though, so i hope to have more time to write, meaning i can get updates out faster!!

i also deleted almost 1000 words of convoluted genetics nonsense because i got way too excited about the science of what might be happening here. then i realized that this would make next to no sense for anyone without a genetics degree, so i deleted all that mumbo jumbo haha and just left some in for some flare.

on another note, my fic for the bnha bang goes up on Thursday, so be on the lookout for that! it's kiribakudeku, and it's got dragons... need i say more?

See y'all soon.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

He cannot deny it any longer. This is the villain that rivals All Might. The one that critically injured the nation's number one hero and left his decrepit shell behind.

This is All for One.

Chapter Notes

there are parts of this chapter i like... and parts that i don't. this was very hard for me to write, so hopefully it's up to standard

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Izuku stares, for a moment, at the body laying at his feet and watches as blood pools from the doctor's head wound. He stumbles back, hands catching on the bed—the operating table—that had imprisoned him. His cheeks feel cold again, and when he looks down, he sees clouds of fog rolling from his face down to the floor to join the heavy layer of mist accumulating at his fist. Izuku thinks, for a moment, that he's lost the flimsy control on his Quirk again, but then a choked noise rips from his throat, and he realizes that he's crying.

“Just focus on calming yourself down and getting control of your Quirk for now,” Aizawa had murmured to him, while Izuku drowned in his inadequacy and disappointment. He still remembers the breathing technique he showed him.

“Got a better grip on yourself now, Problem Child?”

Izuku takes a breath. And then another. The misty tears slowly recede from his eyes, and he tamps down on his Quirk as best as he can, until the fog pouring to the floor shrinks to thick wisps flickering around his hands. He still can't stop his fog completely, but at least he's managed to contain it. Now, he can worry about what comes next.

He needs to leave.

Becoming steadier with every step, Izuku creeps to the door. He doesn't know what lies behind it, but there are no windows or other visible options to provide him a stealthier, more direct exit. He presses his palm against the knob and pushes gently, keeping close to the door

to peek around it as stealthily as he can.

An empty hallway greets him.

Confused, Izuku glances down either side of the hall, but he sees no other doctors, guards, or even cameras. The two other doors he can see are thrown wide open. One room is entirely barren of anything except for stone walls and floors. The other appears very small, with a large chair placed in the center and an assortment of medical supplies shoved in a corner. Still, there is no one and no visible exit.

That leaves only the wide metal stairs ascending at the end of the hall. That is Izuku's only possible way out.

After one last check for cameras, Izuku creeps into the hallway and closes the door to that awful room with its awful doctor behind him. He contemplates barricading the door behind himself but dismisses the idea. He doesn't want to spend a moment longer in this place than he needs to.

He walks slowly, at first, peering into each of the other rooms to make sure that he's truly alone. Then, Izuku runs for the stairs.

Only when his foot hits the first step does Izuku realize that he's running blindly into unknown territory. He doesn't know what lies in the upper levels of this compound, but he does know that the doctor and those terrifying tools and his talk of experiments and his allusions to Oboro, all of *that* is behind him now. Izuku just needs to leave. He needs to run.

("You can't always run from your problems!")

Just as he reaches the top of the stairs, the air pressure around Izuku suddenly shifts. Reacting on instinct alone, he throws himself back to the bottom of the stairs, tucking his head into his arms as he hits the ground. Izuku pulls on his fog, and while it's not quite thick enough to prevent the ache of his landing, he wraps himself with it like a slippery blanket and hopes it'll at least protect him from the impact to come.

A shattering boom shakes the compound. Dust and debris drift from the ceiling, and Izuku waits beneath his cover of fog. When the tremors finally stop, he rises. Painfully slowly, he creeps back to the top of the stairs and cautiously raises just his eyes above the landing to watch the scene before him.

The entire compound—or at least what existed above ground-level—has been reduced to rubble. Piles of stone, pipe, and steel beams cover the ground. They’ve destroyed several of what look to be large tanks once filled with fluid. Izuku thinks that he can see misshapen lumps of flesh peeking through the debris, too large and unsightly to truly be human.

They are Nomu.

(Is this what Izuku had nearly become? A deformed monstrosity like he had seen at the USJ? Or that had attacked him at Hosu? A mindless husk with only enough sentience to follow the orders of its master?

Is this what *Oboro* had become?)

Movement through the rubble catches Izuku’s eye, and he ducks, half-expecting a bloodied Nomu to charge at him. Instead, his eyes focus on a man, standing in the center of the destruction with his back to Izuku and his arms spread, as if greeting visitors. Further in front of him, a lanky man strains under the tension of strings leading from him to wrap around limp bodies. This one, Izuku belatedly recognizes as Best Jeanist.

The sight of the hero nearly causes Izuku to relax, until his thoughts fully comprehend the nature of the situation. Best Jeanist bleeds from a wound on his forehead, and his teeth are visibly gritted in a pained grimace. The bodies held tightly by his thread aren’t those of defeated Nomu or villains, like Izuku had initially thought. They are other heroes, beaten and unconscious.

Best Jeanist stands alone.

He collapses, and he’s suddenly not standing at all.

The unfamiliar man, standing with his arms spread wide, unharmed and untouched by whatever had destroyed the compound, is undoubtedly a villain. One able to crumble the structure of an entire factory without any sign of effort. Not a single line of his pressed suit seems out of place.

The heroes are outmatched.

(And Izuku is trapped in the crossfire. He never stood a chance.)

The villain chuckles lowly and claps twice. Rising to hover high above the fallen heroes, he says, “As expected of the Number Four hero. I

thought I blew everyone away.”

As he lays flat on his back, Best Jeanist trembles.

Izuku ducks further behind the step offering meager cover from this villain. His apparent association with the League makes this man dangerous enough, but to have such incredible power to overwhelm three pro-heroes, one of which being Best Jeanist...

Who is this?

(Izuku knows, deep down, who this is. All Might has told stories of his sinister mortal enemy, *who should be dead*, but in Aizawa’s words, “a villain like that does *not* disappear without any lasting impression.” What if more than just the *shadow* of All for One remains?)

Izuku watches, silent and unmoving, as Jeanist struggles to rise to his elbows. Threads explode from his collar, flimsy and thin and easily knocked away with another smaller blast of air. The villain laughs, and Izuku cowers once again as the pressure writhes around him. His ears pop, but he focuses instead on how blood erupts from Jeanist’s abdomen.

The number four hero collapses limply to the concrete.

The villain sighs. “I suppose this is strength accumulated from years of practice and experience. Without that, your Quirk would be useless for Tomura...”

Fog rushes unbidden from Izuku’s hands, pouring thickly to settle at the stairs behind him, and he stifles a gasp.

He cannot deny it any longer. This is the villain that rivals All Might. The one that critically injured the nation’s number one hero and left his decrepit shell behind.

This is All for One.

Still alive. Still strong. And standing only a few, dangerous meters from Izuku.

Izuku shudders. Scrambling, he tugs his disobedient fog back to himself, painfully aware of the mortal danger he is in. Any wrong move, and All for One’s attention will surely turn on him. A miracle alone has left Izuku undetected so far.

He needs to leave. He needs to escape. He needs to *run*, find somewhere safe, somewhere far away from here.

(“You can’t always run from your problems!”)

Izuku is frozen, cowered in this staircase providing makeshift shelter. His body will not, *cannot*, move.

All for One lights softly back to the ground, careful to avoid the pool of thickening blood, and daintily adjusts his cufflinks. His back remains to Izuku, he’s distracted examining Best Jeanist’s wound, and Izuku should *go*.

He *cannot* become a victim of All for One.

(Not like Oboro.)

Izuku steadies his breathing and calls his fog to wrap more tightly around his arms. He can do this. He just needs to run.

(“You can’t always run from your problems!”)

The sudden sloshing of viscous liquid locks his muscles again, and fountains of sludge pour from thin air, revealing the forms of villains only some of which Izuku recognizes. Shigaraki. Compress. Kurogiri.

(Oboro.)

Breath catches in Izuku’s throat, the sound of his gasp covered by the coughs and gags of the villains as they stumble. Kurogiri falls heavily to the ground and doesn’t get back up.

(Oboro, Oboro, *Oboro*.)

All for One sighs. “Tomura, you’ve failed again. Do not be discouraged, though. You shall try again.”

Shigaraki balances on his knees and looks up to All for One. He and the rest of his comrades, face Izuku, but their attention rests undividedly on their leader.

Kurogiri still lays limply behind them.

(Oboro. That’s *Oboro*.)

“I’ve brought your associates here, as well. I could not reach the child that you wanted, but you can make do without him. Besides, the other

piece is with the doctor now. He will be at your disposal soon.”

The child? Hitoshi. A tense muscle of dread loosens infinitesimally in Izuku’s gut. Hitoshi is safe, far from here. He is not in the same danger that Izuku is in now.

“You can do this over as many times as you need, Tomura.” All for One extends a hand to Shigaraki. “I am here to help you succeed. I am here for *you*.”

Izuku flinches. The air shifts around him once again, the pressure rising, but he doesn’t know why. There are only allies left for All for One to attack now, so why is the air writhing?

Has he finally noticed Izuku, trembling from his flimsy hiding place?

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

A sob cracks through Izuku’s lips, and he chokes on the mist of his own tears.

He’s been found.

Except All for One doesn’t turn to him or his hiding place. He only looks up to the sky, and the pressure screams in Izuku’s ears, threatening to burst.

All Might crashes into All for One.

The collision sends wind and debris roaring outward, and Izuku only barely throws up a wall of fog solid enough to stop a boulder of rubble from shooting through him. The rest of the League tumble weightlessly, strewn haphazardly across the rubble.

Shigaraki rolls to a stop less than a meter beside Izuku. Their eyes catch, and for just a moment, they both fall still in the chaos. Shigaraki frowns and stretches out a hand.

Kurogiri (*Oboro*) is thrown several meters away. An impossible distance. A sliver of yellow light squints from the black smoke.

Somewhere in the commotion, All Might shouts, but the roaring winds drown his voice. All for One laughs and tosses him to the side.

Shigaraki sneers and advances on Izuku.

The yellow light—the *eye*, *that’s Oboro’s eye*—swivels blearily to the

fog smearing Izuku's cheeks. It blinks.

Izuku *cries*.

And his fog escapes from him.

A tsunami of cold haze rolls over the rubble, rising and rising and rising until it blinds everything and everyone, until Izuku can feel their lost forms shifting frantically in the endless confines of the fog surrounding them. While Izuku can sense their movements in the minute changes of the mist, he can no longer see Shigaraki or All Might or All for One. More importantly, they cannot see him.

In the sea of mist, Izuku sees only that distant yellow light, and he *runs*.

“Young Shirakumo?!”

Sound is muffled in the fog, but his shoes still slap noisily against the concrete in his frantic sprint. The invisible figure nearest to him—Shigaraki—reaches his hand out, hissing under his breath, but Izuku ducks beneath those murderous fingers easily enough.

Another one, short enough to probably be the female villain Izuku had noticed earlier, slashes wildly with a knife as he passes her. She doesn't come close to even nicking Izuku.

It's only All for One that worries him.

He has gone eerily still in the center of Izuku's sea of fog. Even All Might bats his arms around wildly, likely trying to dissipate the mist that only creeps in more densely to surround him, but All for One does nothing.

Which means that he must be doing *something*.

A solid, pointed spike erupts from the earth before Izuku. Instincts cause him to call his fog to him, forming a shield of gaseous armor. It slows the spike enough that the tip of it only brushes mockingly against Izuku's nose.

“Oh, the little experiment broke free, has he?”

“Shirakumo!” All Might cries out. “If that is you, call off your Quirk! I am here! I can protect you!”

(“Is my Quirk enough?”)

Slowly, Izuku exhales and leans cautiously from the spike. He does not listen to All Might. He does not call off his fog. It is all that he has, and he cannot afford to lose it.

Izuku keeps his gaze trained steadily on that distant yellow light, he breathes once more, and he runs. Spears of solid obsidian interrupt his path, but pure instinct leads Izuku. His fog guides and protects him. He only needs to trust in it.

All Might yells—begs—for Izuku to lift his blindness and swats uselessly at the thick air around him, but Izuku refuses to relinquish the protection his Quirk grants him. Over the sound of his shouts, All for One laughs, and the vibration tickles against Izuku's face.

"I suppose your Quirk is more versatile than I initially gave you credit for." Another point bursts from the ground. It is stopped again by a congelation of fog, and Izuku dances narrowly around it. "But it is only a meager shield! It cannot *protect* you, little hero!"

("Are you done running, little hero?")

That faint yellow light draws steadily closer. Izuku vaults over the next spike blocking his path, rolling to a stop at Kurogiri's (*Oboro, Oboro, Oboro*) side. The yellow eye blinks, losing the edges of its shape in the haze of dark mist.

Izuku looks back at him.

And the eye finally focuses on him.

The pressure dips around them. Before they can be interrupted by All for One or All Might, Izuku yanks desperately on the fog, draining it from the rubble. It rolls into a tumultuous spiral and cloaks Izuku securely at its epicenter. The exterior of his makeshift whirlpool trembles and buckles and collapses, but Izuku weaves the strands of mist toward the center into a tight pattern. His little sanctuary, in the eye of the storm, becomes impenetrable to outside powers.

Only Izuku and Oboro exist here in their sea of fog.

Another blow shakes the mist around them. They are only safe for however long Izuku's Quirk can hold. Izuku hopes that it will be enough.

("Is my Quirk enough?")

It will have to be enough.

He breathes, trusts his fog to hold strong against the force against it, and finally looks at Oboro.

Oboro doesn't look as Izuku once expected him to.

In the photo albums he'd found tucked away in his mother's nightstand, Oboro consumed entire pictures with just his smile. His exuberance and vibrant personality shone through, his laugh and crinkled eyes eternally frozen in every page. Oboro wore patterned t-shirts and ripped jeans, with rubber Crocs scuffed with grass stains. He hugged his friends close and pressed their cheeks together for selfies and kissed Aizawa on the forehead so his cheeks would flare red in their photos.

That was the Oboro that Izuku acquainted himself with. That was the Oboro from stories and pictures that Izuku always needed to live up to. Boyish, excitable, kind, and loving.

The entity in front of him doesn't look like Oboro, because he is Kurogiri now. But Oboro is in there somewhere, hopefully. If he's not...

The fog writhes with another hit. Their time is running out.

"Hello," Izuku stutters, awkwardly hovering over Kurogiri's body. He doesn't see any injuries, but Kurogiri seems to be bordering unconsciousness, and Izuku isn't sure if there would be any injuries to actually *see* in the mist anyway. Is there even a solid body beneath?

Tentatively, Izuku reaches for Kurogiri's face. He keeps his gaze trained on that yellow, unblinking eye and tries not to focus on how his hand trembles as it sinks into the cold mist.

A blow bashes into the walls of their fortress, and the sudden tremor causes Izuku's hand to disappear into the inky darkness.

His fingers meet flesh, and the shape of Kurogiri's eye becomes more distinct. So quietly that Izuku almost doesn't hear him, Kurogiri murmurs, "Shigaraki Tomura?"

"No. My—My name is Shirakumo Izuku." Izuku paws at the mist shrouding Kurogiri's face, and the outline of a jaw slowly becomes visible.

“Yours is Shirakumo Oboro. Your, uh, your *real* name, that is. You’re my brother.”

Izuku’s hand brushes along Kurogiri’s cheekbone, and for an achingly brief moment, the dark mist dissipates, and a pale blue eye meets Izuku’s.

The fog barrier shakes around them, and Kurogiri shrouds Oboro once again.

“Wait, wait! Your name is Shirakumo Oboro! Your mother is Shirakumo Inko, You were a student at UA high-school, and training to become a hero, but you were hurt, or captured, or something, and you’ve been, uh, with the villains for fifteen years. But you can escape now! *We* can escape! And we’ll—we’ll get you help, and you’ll be okay. We’ll both be okay. Please, I need you to help me get out of here.”

Kurogiri does nothing. He just stares with cold, bright yellow eyes. Izuku feels his fog thinning around them.

“Please,” he begs. “Your name is Shirakumo Oboro. You were born May 5th. You’re sixteen years older than me. Um, you were really close with Yamada Hizashi and Aizawa Shouta, your classmates, in high school. I know this, uh, because they tell me stories, but you must’ve liked them too because there are so many pictures of all of you together. You even drew a heart around Aizawa in one of the pictures I found! Both of them are teachers at UA now—Aizawa teaches my homeroom, he’s really, really cool—and they miss you a lot! I’m close with Aizawa’s son—he has a kid, I guess you wouldn’t know that?—and I can tell he really misses you, even if he doesn’t show it very well? I’m sure he would really like it if you came back...

“I’d really like it too. If you came back. I’ve heard so much about you, so many stories—Mom never stopped talking about you, but the Bakugous and Yamada and Aizawa-sensei have told me some things too—but it would be really nice to *actually* know you.

“Your hero name, at UA, was Loud Cloud, and then when it was my turn to choose a name, I chose Loud Cloud too. Not just because I wanted to be a hero like you were, although that was part of it, but because you were my brother, and you never got to be the hero you wanted to be, and you were taken away from me and Mom, and I just want to protect people from that pain. Because it hurt. I never even met you, not really, but I just wanted to *know you*. I still want that,

now that I know it's possible. You're my brother, and you've been alive all this time, and if we could just get out of here, then we can fix this. I know we can. Someone can help us fix this, we just need to *get out*."

The fog around them quivers, and from the corner of his eye, Izuku can see the tip of a dark spike poking through his barricade. Their time is up.

"Izuku..."

"Yes!" Izuku sobs, brushing more of the thin mist from Oboro's face. It doesn't quite clear entirely, but the shape of those pale, pale eyes peek through. "I'm Shirakumo Izuku. Your brother."

Oboro's head, cradled in Izuku's hands, falls to the side, and he squints at the sharp spears beginning to puncture their sanctuary. "Leave..."

"Yes, yes," Izuku pleads. "It's dangerous here, for both of us. We need to go, but your Quirk is the only way out."

The fog around them ripples as a hole tears through. All for One's voice screams out, "Kurogiri! Bring us the boy."

Oboro turns his head back to Izuku and watches the tears of mist trail down his cheeks. "Please..."

"Kurogiri!" Shigaraki shouts.

"Oboro, *please*. We need to leave."

His eyes—one pale blue, the other still hidden by a haze of yellow—flicker between Izuku and the crumbling fog around them.

Oboro settles on Izuku.

Suddenly, they are falling into empty space and crashing into hard concrete. Oboro's head lolls listlessly to the side, unconscious once again, and Izuku glances up just in time to see a swirling dark portal disappear into the air.

Oboro saved them. They are free.

Ignoring the aching pain in his back, Izuku sits up and looks around to get his bearings.

They're on the roof of UA's main building.

They're okay. They're safe.

Izuku stumbles back from the ledge and collapses to sprawl on the cold ground. His shoulders brush against Kurogiri's—against *Oboro's*—and he cries.

Chapter End Notes

we're back to shouta's pov next chapter folks. i know we've missed our mans

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The End

Chapter Notes

I don't want end notes to clog things up, so I'll say my piece here.

Thank you all so much for reading this story, the first story I have ever finished. I know this last chapter has been a long time incoming, but it's here now to wrap things up.

Please remember, if you're interested, to subscribe to the series where I'll slowly be adding accompanying fics related to Shirakumo Izuku, Aizawa, Oboro, and Hitoshi in this universe. Feel free to join the discord, too, where there is a place to throw me ideas for future installments in this series. The link is at the end of the fic <3

Also, in the discord, I'll be posting some stats for this fic (word count, comment count, etc.) because i find that stuff interesting

Again, thank you all much.

“All Might has apprehended All for One and the seven villains remaining on-site in Kamino. They are being transferred to Tartarus for processing. Shirakumo has been located with the villain known as Kurogiri, unconscious, at UA high school and is currently being transferred to Musutafu General Hospital. His condition is stable. Kurogiri is in protective custody. All heroes and other personnel report to their team leaders for further instruction.”

Shouta bursts through the hospital doors for the second time in forty-eight hours. Just the day before, he had promised Midoriya Inko that he would bring her son back. But Shouta had failed. Izuku had had to save *himself*.

(“You’re the only one!” Oboro had told him. “You’re the only one that

can protect them!”

But Shouta hadn't. He hadn't protected Izuku or Oboro all those years ago. They were alone, and Shouta could do *nothing*.)

Nezu said, over the radio, that Izuku's condition is stable, but Shouta's nerves still boil despite the measly reassurance. It takes conscious effort to keep his hands from quivering at his sides as he hastily walks through the hospital, Hitoshi hurrying silently beside him.

Shouta isn't sure if either of them have breathed since they passed through the hospital doors. “Stable” is open to interpretation, after all. They know, at least, that Izuku is alive. Izuku is not dying. But is he hurt?

(What happened to him when Shouta wasn't there? Just how badly has Shouta failed this time?)

In the hands of Shigaraki, Hitoshi was strapped into a tight muzzle that marked bruises and resurfaced painful memories, but Shouta had found him. He had held his son tight on the roof of a crumbling building and soothed his thumb over the marks imbedded into his cheeks. Hitoshi had been hurt, yes, but Shouta has saved him from the hands of villains before, so many years ago in that foster home, and Shouta saved him again now. This time, just like the time before, Hitoshi will recover.

But Shouta did not save Izuku. *No one did*. Alone, Izuku managed to claw his freedom from the grip of All for One, and he apparently dragged a hostage with him. He appeared miraculously on the roof of UA to only the watchful eyes of the campus's many security cameras. Was he conscious, when the heroes finally reached him? Or did fall to darkness with only the chilling company of a villain beside him? Shouta didn't know.

Izuku was alone, in his fearful capture and his courageous escape.

And he is alone, now, when Shouta and Hitoshi finally turn the corner to the hall leading to his hospital room. Midoriya Inko leans against the wall across from Izuku's door, tears streaming silently down her cheeks.

Izuku is alone, until Hitoshi sprints down the hall, without casting Inko even a glance, and throws the door open. He disappears inside, and Inko stares blankly into the room through the brief opening. When the door shuts again, her gaze flits to Shouta.

He watches as she glances back to the closed door, and then back to him. Slowly, she shakes her head and heaves herself from the wall. Shouta thinks, briefly, that she is going to scold him—for breaking her promise, for failing another one of her sons like he had Oboro.

Instead, she walks past him and disappears around the bend of the hallway.

Midoriya Inko walks away, and Shouta follows Hitoshi to Izuku.

The tile floor of the room is coated in a cold layer of thin fog, rolling lethargically from the bed pressed against the far wall. Hitoshi has already pulled a hospital chair to the bedside, both hands lost in the sea of mist covering the sheets. His body curls inward, shoulders hunched protectively as he murmurs quiet reassurances.

The door closes softly behind Shouta, and Izuku lifts his head from where it's tucked against Hitoshi's.

"Hi, Sensei."

And Izuku smiles. It's a little wobbly, a little unsure, but it is so strikingly *Shirakumo* that Shouta nearly falls to the floor.

He is so lucky to still have a Shirakumo to smile at him.

It's not Oboro's smile, because Oboro is *gone* from Shouta's own shortcomings. But Izuku is not Oboro, and he had not faltered even though Shouta has failed him all the same.

He sinks into a low bow.

"Izuku." Despite the many times he had mentally rehearsed this, Shouta still needs to concentrate on forcing the words through his leaden throat. Not because he does not mean them, but the contrary. The weight of their sheer sincerity threatens to choke him.

"I cannot express how deeply sorry I am for not being there for you. Not only at the camp, when I was incapable of protecting you from villains, but in the time after as well. The fact that neither I nor any of my associates were able to locate you or coordinate your escape is frankly unacceptable. Not only should you have not needed to orchestrate your own rescue without the help of professionals, but a rescue should not have been necessary in the first place, because I never should have let you be taken. Had I done my job, you wouldn't have *ever* been in any danger, but I was not enough to protect you. I

failed. I failed Oboro, too, but this time I intended to do better—"

"Sensei."

Shouta's mouth clamps shut.

The fog lapping gently at his ankles feels colder, stiffer, than it had just seconds before. When Shouta finally looks up from his bow, Izuku's feeble smile has disappeared entirely as he gnaws on his lower lip. Beside him, Hitoshi looks like he wants to reach out to stop him but settles for nudging his shoulder with their intertwined hands instead.

Izuku takes a breath. "Oboro's alive. He's... He *was* Kurogiri."

Shouta's world shudders. He has dreamt those words too many times for them to be true. He's sleepwalked through alternate worlds where he'd been told that, and he'd rushed to Oboro's side to kiss him like he always should have had the courage to do. He's imagined himself graduating with *both* of his best friends beside him. He's watched himself grow older with that blinding smile setting him alight and felt complete in a way he never could have otherwise.

And every morning, he wakes up in harsh and painful reality.

This is how he knows he could not have heard Izuku correctly.

(He'd only ever imagined that voice from the rubble, years ago. Oboro has since the moment that the building fell around him.)

But Hitoshi falters, as if struck, and asks "The *warp villain*?" and Izuku nods, and Shouta realizes that he did hear him correctly after all.

Oboro is *alive*.

"I don't—The villains did something with him, with his body and his—his *mind*, to turn him into... *that*," Izuku heaves. Shouta pictures Kurogiri—Oboro—watching apathetically as children's lives were threatened, as Izuku's life was threatened, as *Shouta's* life was threatened. That would never have been the Oboro that Shouta knows. "It wasn't him. Not—Not really. But I talked to him and begged him to help me, and *that* was Oboro. It was Oboro who helped me escape and took me to the roof. He's still *there*. He's alive."

Knees trembling, Shouta falls heavily into the open chair beside Izuku.

“What—”

“I don’t know,” Izuku huffs. Beneath the layer of fog, his free hand twists tightly into the fabric of his sheets, so tightly that his knuckles turn white. Hitoshi untangles him gently, pressing so his fingers lay flat between his palms. “They tried to—to—”

He flounders, choking on a quiet sob.

“Me too. They tried to change me too.

“Whatever they did to Oboro... it wasn’t enough. The doctor said that too much of Oboro was still in there, but with me, I’d be perfect. He did something to my Quirk, and now it’s *this*, and he almost—He almost *did it*. I would’ve been gone, and I don’t think I could’ve come back like Oboro did. I would’ve been a *monster*—”

Hitoshi relinquishes his grip on Izuku’s hands to cup his cheeks instead, burying his fingers in the rolls of fog falling from his eyes. “Shhhhh, you got out! You’re okay, Izuku, *you’re okay*.”

Hesitantly, Shouta places his hand on Izuku’s head. “You did good, Problem Child. You did so good. I wasn’t—I couldn’t help, not like I should have as your teacher, and you might feel that I have no right to say this, but I’m proud of you. And so glad that you are here now, safe.”

“Sensei,” Izuku warbles, sniffing, “you did help me. Even if you weren’t there, I knew you were looking for me, and you were trying. You’re my teacher, and a great hero, so I just did what you would have done. And it worked. You guided me. I don’t think I could’ve done that, gotten out, if you weren’t there for me, Sensei. *Thank you*.”

(“...*the only one*...”)

The air hisses from Shouta’s lungs, and he nods disjointedly. He doesn’t much trust his words right now, so he repeats “You did good, kid.” He ruffles his hand gently through Izuku’s curls and nearly chokes when Izuku tilts his head more firmly into the touch.

The soft, feathery weight of fog sliding through his fingers is achingly familiar from years long passed, and for the first time in years, he lets his thoughts firmly settle on Oboro and the fantasy of reuniting with him.

A fantasy that has somehow, miraculously, shifted toward reality.

A ruckus rises from the hallway outside. Threatening, barely restrained explosions frame a desperate voice declaring, “Out of my way, extras! We’re here to see my fucking brother, so move it!”

Izuku laughs softly, wiping the wispy tears from his cheeks. At his side, Hitoshi reaches for his hand, still wrapped in thick fog, and squeezes it tightly. Shouta lets his hand fall from his student’s hair to settle on his shoulder and squeezes firmly.

Shirakumo Izuku was never truly alone, and he never will be.

The next day, Shouta returns to the hospital with Hizashi and Hitoshi in tow. Not specifically to visit Izuku, although he intends to do so after the appointment. Instead, the elevator rides past the patient recovery rooms to the treatment centers, and an old doctor leads him and his followers to the physical therapy wing.

While Shouta had fully expected Hizashi’s company at his appointment—Hizashi hasn’t seemed to want to be alone much after being told the news about Oboro, having even spent the night on Shouta’s couch the day before—he had not expected Hitoshi’s. Shouta thought Hitoshi would detour to Izuku’s room during the therapy session and is admittedly surprised to see him sit in an armchair alongside Hizashi, apparently content to watch Shouta flounder through his exercises.

The following hours of repeatedly bending his knee to test range of motion, stretching it against a resistance band, and other inane exercises are not how Shouta wishes his son would see him, but he doesn’t think he’ll ever regret the decision that led him here. It may have been illogical for Shouta to join the recovery mission—unnecessary even, his subconscious spits bitterly—but he’d allow a chronically lame knee if it meant he could personally pull Hitoshi from the villains and remove that terrible muzzle himself. If it meant even attempting to keep his silent promise to Izuku, that he’d protect him better than he did Oboro.

So Shouta lets Hitoshi watch him struggle through simple exercises and refuses to let his frown slip into a grimace.

Shouta would never regret a decision made to protect those he loves,

no matter how illogical, and he needs Hitoshi to know that.

After, when Shouta's leg aches dully in the familiar pain of healing, Hizashi slips away, and Shouta and Hitoshi head to the patient recovery floor. The appointment had dwindled into late evening, and it's well past visiting hours, but there are special perks that come with being a pro-hero constantly in and out of the hospital. Nobody bats an eye when they slip down the hallway to Izuku's room.

Hitoshi, eager to see his not-boyfriend-but-almost-boyfriend, strides a little ways ahead of Shouta. He throws the door open and promptly stalls in the doorway. Shouta manages to stop just before crashing into him and peers into the doorway around Hitoshi's head, dreading what complication might be lying on the other side.

(he's dead, he's dead, you left him alone again, and now izuku's dead)

Izuku, still safe and still alive, sits upright in his hospital bed. Catching sight of his visitors, he smiles and waves gleefully, but Shouta can see the subtle tightness at the corner of his ticked lips. Exhaustion, or even a more general weariness weighs down his grin.

Beside him, Yagi Toshinori sits in a flimsy plastic chair, skeletal and pale. He looks sick, Shouta thinks, which should be expected after... recent events. UA staff had been told at this morning's debrief that Yagi had been admitted to this hospital. According to Nezu, he hasn't been able to assume his larger Quirked form since his defeat of All for One.

It was likely nothing less than a miracle that kept All Might's Quirk from failing him at Kamino. Yagi must have clung to One for All by the skin of his fingers to have lasted so long, waiting for All for One to be in chains and the cameras to turn away before allowing his Quirk to rest.

Shouta wonders if he even has any of One for All left to offer Izuku, and if that has anything to do with his presence at his injured student's bedside so long after official visiting hours.

Yagi stutters and rises hurriedly from his seat. "Ahem, I— I should be going, then." He nods once to Shouta and his group, and then dips into a bow low enough that his bangs brush Izuku's sheets through the fog. "Rest well, Shirakumo, and know that, should you ever change your mind, the offer will remain open for you. I wish you an efficient recovery."

He turns, woodenly, and both Shouta and Hitoshi silently step aside to allow his exit. Yagi is halted mid-step, though, by a timid voice calling from the hospital bed.

“Yagi-san.”

Yagi twists his head, thick eyebrows raised into his hairline.

“Yagi-san, if you ever wish for some company... I won’t be discharged for at least another few days. Not until I can get my Quirk under control again.” He taps thoughtfully on the IV tube feeding water and electrolytes into his vein. “And you, uh, know where to find me.”

A smile, miniscule compared to the signature grin of All Might but just as bright, flits over Yagi’s face. “Thank you, Young Shirakumo. I will keep that in mind.”

And he disappears down the hallway.

Immediately, Shouta cocks his head, silently interrogating Izuku even as he assumes his established position in the uncomfortable plastic chair. Hitoshi is much less nuanced and darts to Izuku so quickly that he crashes clumsily into the bed as he crawls to tuck Izuku into his side.

“Did he want something?”

Izuku nods, pressing his teeth into his bottom lip, and stares a little emptily at the now closed door to his room.

An Izuku lost in thought is familiar to Shouta, and he taps his pointer finger twice against Izuku’s forehead to bring him back to the present. The skin there is a little cold, and a little clammy from being tucked beneath the flickering curls of fog, but Shouta notices that Izuku’s control of his Quirk seems to be somewhat tighter today, with only smaller rivulets of mist falling from his clasped hands.

Izuku jolts, eyes refocusing on Shouta, and Hitoshi presses an almost imperceptible kiss where his nose is pressed in the fog of hair.

“Sorry,” Izuku apologizes, unnecessarily in Shouta’s opinion, but it’s a habit yet to be broken.

“All Might?” Shouta prompts.

“Oh. I turned it down.”

An invisible tension disperses from the room. Shouta finally releases a breath he feels he's been holding for months as he sinks minutely into his chair. The choice to accept One for All had been Izuku's, and *only* Izuku's, but Shouta had still semi-privately believed there was a correct decision. Miraculously, Izuku resisted the fantastical temptation of power that Shouta feared would inevitably cost his mind, soul, and life.

To hear that Izuku made the rational, *safe* choice for once... Shouta is relieved.

Hitoshi is, too, as he tugs Izuku's hands into his and leans forward to say, "You don't need it," with all the gravitas he can muster.

Izuku knocks their shoulders together. He glances at Shouta. "I know. I'll be a good hero without it, I think."

Shouta rolls his eyes. "We still need to work on that confidence, Problem Child. You'll be a great hero by the time I'm done with you."

Izuku beams, a blush creeping beneath his freckles, and he ducks his gaze to his lap. The fog pooled there writhes and, after a moment, disperses entirely.

A small part of Shouta worries, secretly, that Izuku's Quirk will never be the same, not after the doctor tried to twist his DNA into the abstract monstrosity of a Nomu's. It is almost inevitable that Fog has been permanently scarred by Izuku's time spent as a lab rat. This new version of his Quirk is something strange and mutated, feral and untamed. Immeasurably stronger and all-around unfamiliar compared to the Quirk Izuku has cultivated since childhood. Now, Izuku struggles to direct the fog into obedience and shape it as skillfully as before. When his attention slips, he fails to even contain the moisture within himself and deteriorates as uncontrolled fog falls to the floor in sheets around him.

A larger part of Shouta, though, wholeheartedly trusts that Izuku will adapt like he's always proved to before. He'll learn the new facets of this Quirk and find a way to use them for his own advantage. After all, he managed an amazing feat when he faced the League, creating a fog cloud large enough to obscure the entire warehouse and still pay enough attention to sense every movement within the mist. Compared to Izuku's performance in class before, he wasn't capable of anything of that scale, and judging by Izuku's meager control over his Quirk now, it had likely only been adrenaline and desperation that allowed

him to do it then.

Still, Izuku has proven that he *can* use his Quirk as it is now, and he can use it *well*. He only needs to learn to be able to call on Fog voluntarily without relying on the pressure of another deadly situation. If only because Izuku will never be in such a helpless situation like that again, as far as Shouta is concerned.

Izuku is already learning, already practicing, and already improving. He'll undoubtedly reach the same level of incredible control that he had before and become the hero he is destined to be.

And Shouta will be there to guide him until he does.

"You're doing better," Hitoshi murmurs, watching the fog in the room wane until only a few wisps dusted the tile.

Shouta nodded in silent agreement, but still fixed Izuku with a stern look. "Don't overdo anything, Problem Child. Just focus on not dehydrating yourself, and we'll work on everything else once you get back to UA, got it?"

Izuku doesn't respond, rolling a ball of mist between his palms. This time, Shouta doesn't knock him out of his thoughts and simply waits for him to gather himself.

"They want me to visit him—Oboro—once I'm released."

Shouta stiffens. There are a lot of questions to follow that statement, especially considering Shouta hasn't been given any recent information on Oboro-slash-Kurogiri's wellbeing or whereabouts. Izuku doesn't immediately explain, though, and just continues to fiddle absently with the fog rolling through his fingers, thinking. Shouta and Hitoshi share a glance to confirm their agreement that, for this, they'll wait as long as Izuku needs.

"He's here, in the hospital. There's a special ward, in the basement, for injured villains, and they have him there for now. Sedated. They aren't sure what state he'll be in when he wakes up, or *who* he'll even be, but they think that since I was able to get through to him before, having family there when they bring him back might be helpful. They asked my mom, I guess, but she... She said she couldn't see him like that, so now there's just me.

"I was wondering, Sensei—I already asked, and the detective and the doctors said it would be fine—but I was hoping you might go with me? To see him?"

Izuku won't meet Shouta's eyes. He sits in his hospital bed, quiet and timid with tears of mist running down his face, and Shouta realizes that Izuku expects to be rejected. He expects to face the resurrected ghost of his brother alone, after his mother turned away from her sons.

Of course, seeing Oboro again will be inevitably painful. Shouta's denied himself to even imagine something like this for years, and now it has been presented to him as a warped version of his greatest fantasy. For all anyone knows, Oboro regaining himself once was nothing more than a fluke, and now they will be left with nothing but a monster wearing his face.

But Shouta has already promised that Izuku won't be alone again, and he certainly won't be leaving him alone with something like this. Not when Izuku has even more to lose than Shouta does.

"Of course I will," Shouta promises. "But don't push your recovery, Problem Child. Let yourself heal, take as much time as you need to, and then we'll face Oboro together."

Shortly after, Shouta leaves Hitoshi and Izuku a moment alone under the guise of finding more tasteless hospital coffee. He should call Hizashi, too, to update him on Izuku and Oboro and how Shouta feels a breath away from teetering over the edge of a cliff he cannot see.

But he finds Yagi in the cafeteria and his immediate priorities shift.

He is sifting through a tray of bland-colored food, a stark white hospital wrist band dangling loosely from his thin wrist. Sunken eyes find Shouta's, and he nods to the empty seats of the table. Shouta sits at the bench across from him.

Yagi tells him, "He said no."

"I heard. Will you accept his choice?"

Yagi sighs and sets down his fork, staring blankly at his hardly-touched food. "I am disappointed, of course, but that decision is his. However, the decision for a worthy successor was mine, and I made my mind up long ago. I won't retract my offer, nor will I extend One for All to anyone else. A Quirk like this belongs only in the hands of someone exceptionally special... If it is not him, then it is nobody. It'll remain in my possession until he chooses to accept it, or the Quirk will simply die with me. I know no one else worthy of holding this power other than Shirakumo Izuku.

“With or without it, *he* will be the next Symbol of Peace.”

It takes Izuku four days to control fog well enough that he's not constantly on the edge of dehydration. When Shouta meets him outside the hospital the day after his discharge, fog still pools in a shallow puddle around his feet, but its density is much more sparse than the overflow had been days before. It no longer rolls from Izuku's hand in thick waves and instead follows like a long cloak trailing behind his every step.

As expected, Izuku waits alone, but his head shoots up and he smiles, albeit feebly, at Shouta's approach.

“Thank you for coming, Sensei.”

“Of course.”

Shouta sets a hand on Izuku's shoulder and allows himself the comfort of squeezing it just once, feeling the solid flesh of his student beneath his palm despite Izuku's appearance that a strong wind would blow him away. His skin is pale and ghostly, and he is eyeing the opposite end of the street like he wishes he could run, but Izuku is here despite that.

They are about to be face-to-face with someone Shouta thought he would never see again. Someone Izuku never thought he would ever get the privilege to meet.

Oboro.

“Are you ready, Problem Child?”

Izuku exhaled slowly, releasing only small wisps of fog to curl along his breath. His fingers tighten around the strap of his bulging backpack. “Yeah, let's go.”

Shouta lets Izuku set their pace and follows just a half step behind. He winds through the hospital hallways and stairwells with only slight hesitation. Shouta would bet money that he had memorized the path to the criminal-treatment ward in the late hours of the night when his anxiety kept him from rest. Shouta would have done the same.

To ease the echoes of their solemn footsteps, Shouta asks, “What’s in the bag?”

The responding blush brings some needed color to Izuku’s face. “Just, uh, some things I thought might help...”

Shouta lifts an eyebrow inquisitively, and Izuku stops to swing his backpack in front of him and unzip it. Inside, Shouta sees the leather binding of some worn books with the glossy corners of loose photos peeking through the pages, and shoved in the bottom of the pack, a bundle of achingly familiar brown fabric.

Shouta is silent for a moment too long, perhaps, staring at the visible square of jacket, and Izuku slowly tugs the zipper shut. “I thought maybe these would remind him of, well, you know, who he was? It’s just the old scrapbooks I found at my mom’s a long time ago, and his old jacket, too.”

“Smart idea.” Shouta nudges Izuku gently, and they continue down the stairs. They’re close now, and it’ll do them no good to stall. “Did you bring any pictures of yourself?”

Izuku chews his lip but ultimately nods. “Yeah, I did. I don’t wanna assume that he’ll want to look at them, really, but I have a few. Just in case.”

Shouta knows without any doubts that Oboro will want to see them. Even if there is only a tiny remnant of the Oboro that Shouta once knew hidden in Kurogiri’s body, he’ll ache to know that he missed fifteen formative, important years of his baby brother’s life. Photos won’t be enough to remedy the despair of being nothing more than a stranger—or worse, a villain—to Izuku, and he’d be desperate to reconnect with him.

Shouta doesn’t say this out loud, though. He doesn’t know what awaits them in that hospital room, if there will be any inkling of Oboro to forge the brotherly relationship that he and Izuku both deserve.

He refuses to give Izuku undue hope.

The stairs eventually lead them to a heavy metal door. Shouta presses the buzzer on the wall, and they are quickly let in and ushered through a security screening more reminiscent of a prison rather than a hospital. Shouta watches as they rifle through Izuku’s bag for any paraphernalia. When they finish, Izuku hugs the bag tightly to his chest as they follow a guard down the hallway.

Either side of them are large windows, likely paned with one-way glass, that open into empty hospital rooms. Further down the hall, presumably where rooms are occupied, guards are posted outside each door. Their guide stops them at an earlier door, spaced fairly distant from the rest of the rooms, and a doctor greets them. She explains that Kurogiri—Oboro—has been sedated since being brought to the hospital, and they'll be incrementally lowering the sedative dosage so that he slowly comes back to consciousness over a twenty or thirty minute interval. The hospital has no means of counteracting a Quirk as versatile as Warp aside from strapping Kurogiri to the bed to prevent his own escape, so Shouta and Izuku will be trusted with preventing any portals from opening themselves.

Izuku doesn't seem to pay much attention to the doctor as he stares through the observation window that Shouta has been resolutely avoiding. He fears that he might not have the strength to follow Izuku in if he looks now and doesn't like what he sees, and he can't risk it.

Finally, when the doctor realizes that her medical jargon is too much for their anxious minds, she presses a long code into the door's keypad and holds it open.

Izuku enters first, but Shouta is no more than a step behind. They go in together.

And there is Oboro.

Shouta hasn't seen Oboro for over a decade, but he's thought of him every day since his disappearance.

Shouta hasn't seen Oboro for over a decade, but he has seen his brother, and he has seen Oboro every day in Izuku's smile.

Shouta hasn't seen Oboro for over a decade, and he never let himself imagine seeing him again, but now Shirakumo Oboro lays only two feet from Shouta, and he is alive.

He is taller than he had been, when they were kids, and his face is gaunt with features sunken. Sharp corners of bone push against the pale skin of his joints, and his breaths rattle shakily through his oxygen mask. The mist of his hair, once a vibrant neon blue, has faded into the sullen grey of clouds before rain and rests flatly against the damp fabric of the pillow. Trickle of fog, faded that same soft grey, roll from beneath his eyelids to fall across his cheeks.

This is Oboro now, Shouta realizes. A sleeping statue of muted colors

blurred by the hazy fog surrounding him. But he is here all the same, fingers twitching minutely in his sleep, and Shouta and Izuku can only accept what they can get.

The two of them sit on the cold tile, sinking into the grey mist steadily mixing with Izuku's eerie green. From his pack, Izuku pulls out the scrapbooks one-by-one and places them neatly before him. Shouta sees that he reaches for the jacket, too, but pulls away just as his fingers brush the fabric. He leaves it in the bag for now.

Telegraphing his movements in case Izuku decides to stop him, Shouta reaches for the closest scrapbook. Izuku watches him, but says nothing, so Shouta tugs it so it sits between them and flips it open.

For the next few minutes, they are silent as they look at the photos. The book is dated the year that Izuku was born. It was the same year that Oboro disappeared—*died*.

The very first page is a picture taken in a hospital room. Their mother is only partially visible laying in the bed out of frame. In the center, face ruddy with a blush and clouds of tears brimming his eyes, Oboro smiles gleefully. He holds a doe-eyed, potato-shaped baby so that their cheeks press together so forcefully that the baby's lips quirk into a lopsided grin of its own.

Both Shouta and Izuku stare at the picture, running their fingers absentmindedly over the faces of the brothers trapped in the past, and then they flip the page.

This scrapbook of Oboro's final year abruptly ends not even half way through, going from a photo of Oboro grinning in his hero jacket to nothing more than empty pages. Shouta sighs and moves to tuck the book away, when a thin stack of loose photos slips from between the remaining pages and scatters to disappear beneath the fog.

Shouta helps Izuku gather them, moving slowly enough to observe the photos for himself. They're all of Izuku and Bakugou Katsuki, aging drastically between them. There is one of them as toddlers, hands outstretched above them sparking small explosions and dripping thin fog. In another, elementary Izuku hugs Katsuki close, and their proud grins are short a few teeth. There are a couple of them from middle school, judging by their uniforms, and another of the two of them holding copies of their acceptance letters from UA.

The most recent, from what Shouta can see, must have been taken probably only days before the summer camp. Both boys are dressed in

their hero outfits and posing dramatically. Bakugou's smirk can be described as nothing other than feral, one clawed hand held in front of him so his palm faces the sky. The large explosion blooming from his glove is enough to illuminate their faces in a stark orange light. Izuku's smile, while still somewhat shy, is one of the largest Shouta has seen from him. Both of his arms are flexed in a way Shouta finds comical, so that the line of his biceps shows through the thick sleeves of his jacket, and a wall of fog floats behind them as a greenish back-drop.

The patch declaring his hero identity as Loud Cloud is visible enough to be read even from the distance of the picture.

Izuku hesitates when he slips this photo back between the pages of the scrapbook and bites his lip. His eyes seem to catch on that bright patch, same as Shouta, before he finally tucks it away. Silently, they move to the next book, dated a year earlier than the last one, and continue to move backwards in time as they wait.

They don't wait much longer.

Steadily, the beeping of the heart monitor increases its pace, and when Shouta recognizes the tempo of an average resting heart rate, he gently lifts Izuku's hands from the open pages to close the scrapbook. Izuku, who looks up at Shouta with hesitant eyes, takes the hint easily enough. He sits back and tucks his trembling hands into his lap.

They watch as sporadic twitching of cloud-laden fingers grows to shifting of the head and shoulders to crinkling of the nose and downturn of the mouth.

Finally, Oboro opens his eyes.

For a flash of a moment, his irises are covered by the yellow haze. But then Izuku, rising slowly from his seat on the floor, calls "Oboro?" and Kurogiri recedes. What's left is a soft grey, the same shade as the misty shock of hair, that stares blearily at Izuku hovering awkwardly at the side of the bed.

"Oboro?" Izuku repeats. "Do you remember—Do you know who you are?"

Oboro only squints.

A cold claw chokes at Shouta's throat. This body in front of him, it is only a ghost. A remnant of a friend he has lost long ago. Even now,

Shouta doesn't know if he will ever come back.

Gingerly, Izuku places his hand atop Oboro's. "Do you know who *I* am? Do you remember, Oboro?"

"*Izuku?*"

If Shouta were standing, he thinks he would have collapsed. The voice is quiet and raspy like a whisper, but he knows that voice. He's heard it boisterous and gentle and even sad. He's heard it murmuring soft words against his cheek. He's heard it calling his name, hoarse and muffled by the rubble of a falling building.

("Shouta!")

He staggers to his feet. By the bed, Izuku nods vigorously and wipes the fog pouring from his eyes with his free hand. His other Oboro has shifted to grip tightly between his own bony fingers.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's me, Oboro. I'm Izuku. And I brought a—"

"Shouta?"

Those eyes of frosted glass focus on him, and Shouta realizes that there is a shade of blue in there after all.

Shouta breaks through the ice in his veins. "Oboro."

He steps closer, aching to be near, to touch, but he is hesitant to encroach on what should be Izuku's moment, his impossible reunion with a dead brother.

But Izuku smiles, tearful yet so content, and Shouta lets himself into their space. He wishes to hold Oboro, to sit on the bed beside him and press their sides together to feel every inch of solid, present flesh, but now is not the time. He settles for dropping a hand to Oboro's shoulder and stands near enough to Izuku that the kid instinctively rests against him.

Oboro flicks his gaze carefully over their features. Occasionally, his eyes would lose their focus, covered again by a glossy sheen, before he reigned it back with a furrowed brow.

"How long?"

"Fourteen years," Shouta answers. Oboro blinks at him slowly, and Shouta wonders how much he himself has really changed over the

years. His hair is still unkempt and shaggy, his eyes still sunken into dark circles. He is taller, sure, and his chin is covered with stubble that he didn't have at sixteen, but Shouta is surely more recognizable than Oboro is now.

But Oboro's gaze swings slowly, tiredly, to Izuku and stays there, and Shouta realizes that of all of them, Izuku has grown the most.

The last time Oboro had seen Izuku—probably with a kiss and hug good-bye before he left, smiling, for the internship that would mean his doom—his brother was a *baby*. An infant who cried and giggled and couldn't yet babble Oboro's name.

The brother standing here now is not that infant. He is grown, a teenager by most standards and an adult by the standards of those who know what he's been through. With age, his features have taken a familiar shape, and his Quirk has shown itself, and the combination has distinguished him to be a Shirakumo through-and-through.

To Oboro, his baby brother has jumped forward in time without even a meager glimpse of the stages in-between.

Shouta squeezes Oboro's shoulder, as comfortingly as he is able, and does not release the pressure when he speaks.

"You're..."

"I'm Shirakumo Izuku. Your brother," Izuku croaks. He's still futilely wiping the fog from his eyes, but every time it is replaced by a fresh torrent of tears. "I turn sixteen next week. July 15th."

Oboro nods. He seems dazed as he looks at Izuku and lifts his quivering hand, with Izuku's still clasped in it, to brush the freckles of his brother's cheek. "Fourteen years," he murmurs, then repeats, "Fourteen..."

A haze covers his eyes again, and Shouta jerks forward when it doesn't clear right away, until he sees the dam of mist building along his bottom lid.

Looking back on it, Shouta doesn't think he'd ever seen Oboro cry. Not happy, bright, optimistic Oboro who smiled even as a building collapsed atop him.

But he cries now, a gaunt mirror reflection of Izuku's silent tears in front of him. The resemblance is undeniable.

“Your brother is a problem child if I’ve ever seen one,” Shouta says, hoping to staunch the tears before they suffocate from the climbing humidity. “Beat everyone else’s score in the entrance exam by short circuiting a ten-story robot for no good reason.”

“I couldn’t just leave Ochako there!”

“Like I said: a problem child.”

Oboro croaks, “You... UA?”

Izuku flinches, steadied only by Shouta’s support. “You don’t remember what I said, back at the base?”

“Base?”

Izuku glances to Shouta, and Shouta shakes his head. If Oboro doesn’t remember the base, or the League, or the ordeal leading to his loss of autonomy, then now would not be the time to remind him. Shouta has seen cases similar to this before, where heroes lose their time spent in torturous conditions, and the memories never seem to truly be absent for long. When these memories return, they do not do so quietly, and the trauma follows its victim like a plague.

Shouta knows that Oboro’s situation is different in so many fundamental ways that this may not be the same case, and if he never remembers Shigaraki or All for One or Kurogiri, then that might be a rare blessing of the universe... but from Shouta’s experience, pain and torture always manage to haunt their host in some way. It is just the way of the world.

For now, though, Oboro deserves this peace of forgetfulness. They’ll cross the bridge of inevitable questions when they get to it.

“I’m a UA first-year,” Izuku explains, accepting Shouta’s cue to skip over he and Oboro’s actual first meeting for now. “Class 1-A. Aizawa-sensei is my homeroom teacher.”

Oboro shifts his gaze to Shouta, evidently still lagging but expression otherwise unreadable, before returning to watch Izuku reverently.

“I’m sure he’d like to see pictures as proof, Problem Child,” Shouta guides, and Izuku hurries to dig through the stack of scrapbooks and memorabilia left at the foot of the bed.

“Thank you.”

Shouta jerks back around. Oboro's words were so quiet that Shouta questions whether they were inexplicably for him, or just a deferential exhale to the universe. Oboro's face is still slack, either from drugs or exhaustion, and his voice too raspy to decipher much tone, but he looks at Shouta steadily, gaze unmoving, until Izuku pops back up from the floor.

The gratitude must have just been murmured into space, Shouta decides. Oboro is so relieved to be reunited with his little brother that he could no longer keep it to himself.

Even if it were to have been meant for Shouta, there would no reason. What would Oboro have to thank him for after all these years?

("You're the only one who can save him.")

"I have some photos, um, of me and Kacchan over the years," Izuku says, stealing away Oboro's attention once again. "But I brought you something else, too. I thought you might want it back."

Reverently, Izuku passes Oboro his jacket. Oboro stares, for just a moment, and runs a finger over the worn patch over the breast.

"Your hero name. What is it?"

Izuku beams. His smile is only vaguely shadowed by melancholy and thoughts of 'What if?', and Shouta is proud. There is much for him to look forward to. There is much for *all of them* to look forward to, now that they do not need to be anchored by the past.

"I'm Loud Cloud."

Shouta and Izuku sit on the edge of the bed, cushioned by a blanket of soft fog, across from Oboro, and they move forward together.

End Notes

discord: <https://discord.gg/uSZeFxqnQN>

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